Soshi Kawasaki

Concept

Yuji Naka
Naoto Ohshima
Tadaaki Nakano
Yuko Ishida

Illustration

ARZEST Corp.

BALAN WONDERWORLD™

~Maestro of Mystery, Theatre of Wonders~

SQUARE ENIX.

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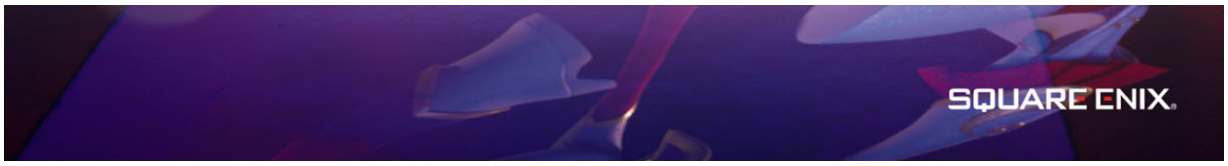

SQUARE ENIX

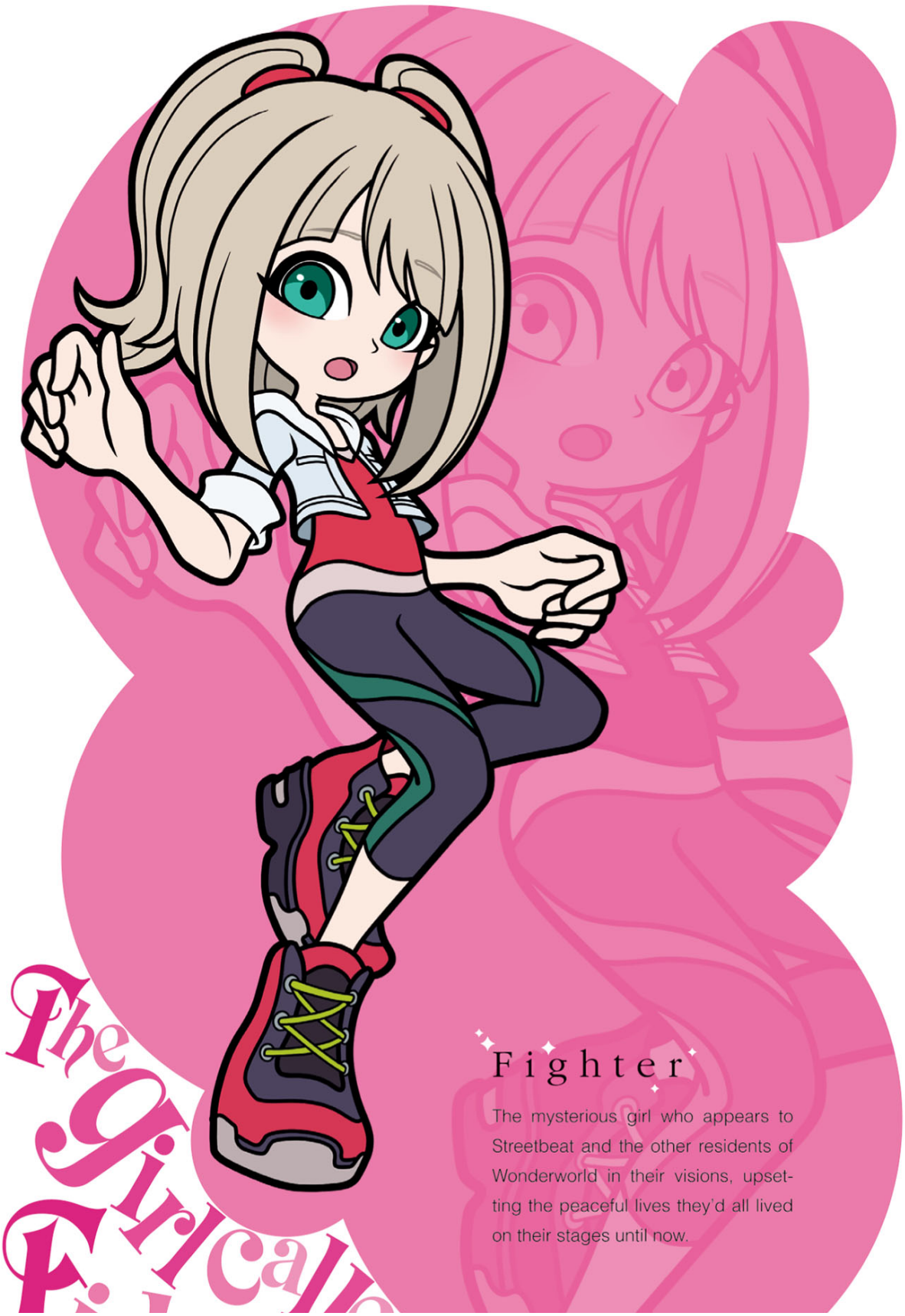
The Balan Theatre

appears out of nowhere.

~Maestro of Mystery, Theatre of Wonders~

Streetbeat

The star of our show. Too cool to join any dance troupes, he rehearses his moves in the solitude of his stage, made in the likeness of a beautiful city center.


The Girl
Fighter
The mysterious girl who appears to Streetbeat and the other residents of Wonderworld in their visions, upsetting the peaceful lives they'd all lived on their stages until now.

The Grinning Man in the Top Hat

An unsettling man who appears, along with Fighter, to the residents of Wonderworld in their visions. With his top hat drawn well below his eyes and a mouth warped in a constant grin, it's no wonder everyone feels a little creeped out by him.

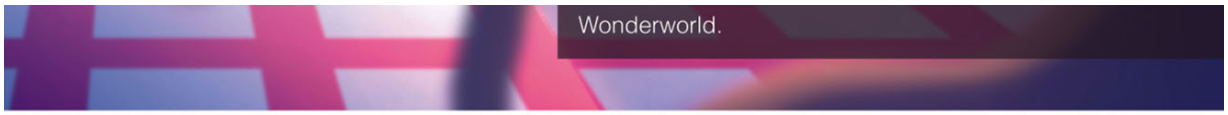
Lance

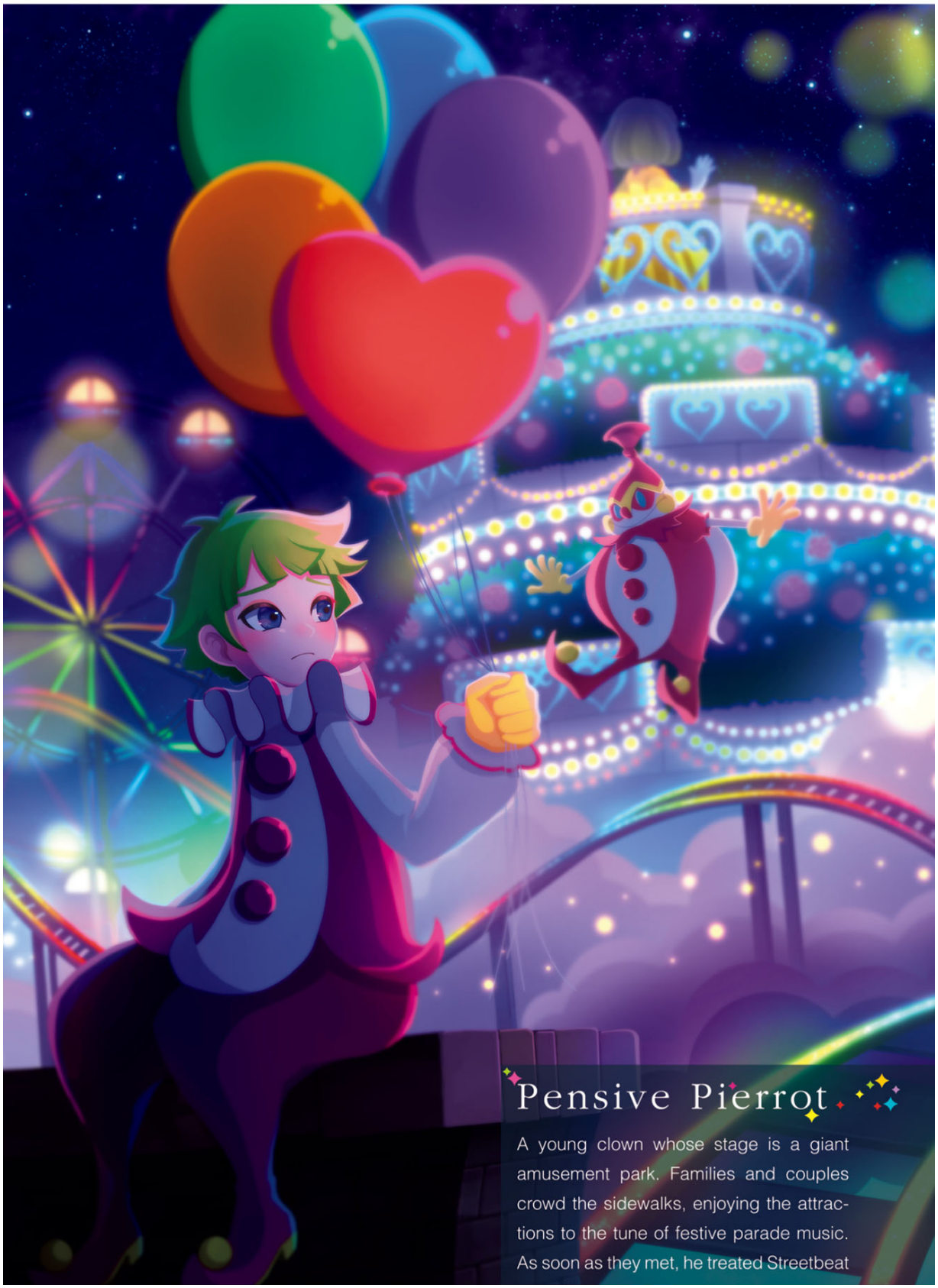
Lance

Introducing himself as the maestro of Wonderworld, this mild-mannered man strikes a handsome figure in his white outfit and cape. He warmly watches over all of Wonderworld's residents, Streetbeat included.

Clocktower Kid

The first person Streetbeat meets in Wonderworld. Her spacious stage, centered around a beautiful clocktower plaza, is bursting with adorable things big and small. She's the one who told Streetbeat about all the other residents of


Wonderworld.



Pensive Pierrot

A young clown whose stage is a giant amusement park. Families and couples crowd the sidewalks, enjoying the attractions to the tune of festive parade music. As soon as they met, he treated Streetbeat

to a ride on the Ferris wheel.

Scarecrow
A farmer who spends his days looking out over his vast cornfields, which stretch as far as the eye can see. A gracious host, he brought out refreshments including ginger ale and coffee when Streetbeat and the others visited his stage.

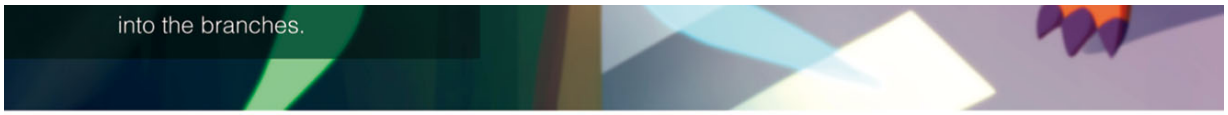
Bugsy

Her stage is a forest where myriad bugs as big as puppies live together in harmony. Though shy, she gave a warm welcome to Streetbeat and the

others when they visited.

Watcher of the Woods

A woman who protects the deep, sun-dappled woods that cover her stage. She invited Streetbeat and the others to chat in one of the many cozy treehouses built


into the branches.

Sentinel
of the City
A brawny man who patrols the sunset city of his stage to make sure everyone is safe. From every house spills warm light, and through the windows happy families can be seen sitting down to their supper.

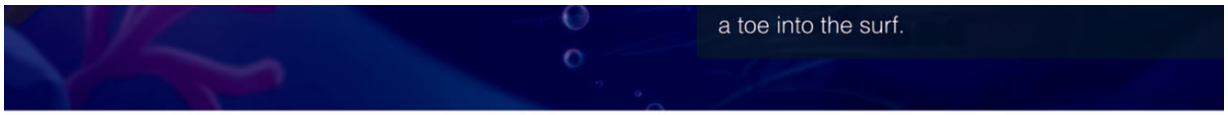
Skygazer

A bespectacled high school boy who lounges in the grass staring up at the sky above. The hills of his stage are covered in windmills of every color and culminate in cliffs that spill down

into the sea.

Seagazer

A woman with long hair pulled into a ponytail, who sits on a bindweed-blanketed beach and stares out over the sprawling sea. Yet, she never even dips


a toe into the surf.

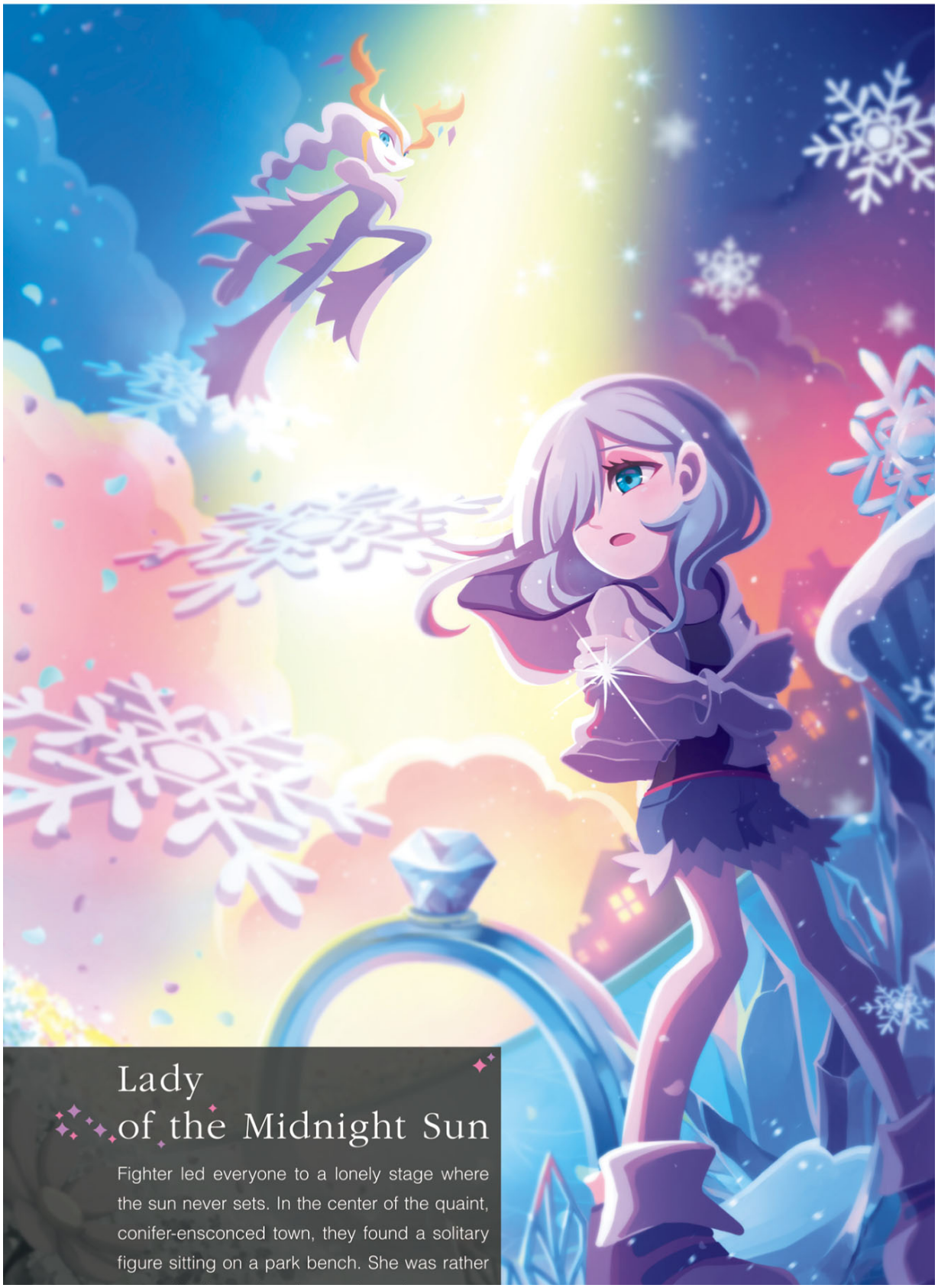
Madam
of the Mansion
A prim butler opens the door to welcome visitors to the Madam's opulent mansion, guiding them to her through rooms resplendent with ornate furnishings. It was when meeting this talkative, lovely lady that Streetbeat and the others caught their first glimpse of furry, wriggling *somethings*.

Checkered King

This sharply-dressed gentleman's stage is something straight out of the middle ages. In the castle in the center of town he lives, along with his queen, beautiful in her gown and tiara. At the jousting match to which the king invited them to spectate, Streetbeat and the others caught another

glimpse of those furry things.

Invisible Custodian
The stately old man who strolled out of the imposing ruins of the ancient temple, his walking stick tapping against the stone. He wanders the ruins constantly to make sure there isn't a scrap of litter in sight.



Lady of the Midnight Sun

Fighter led everyone to a lonely stage where the sun never sets. In the center of the quaint, conifer-ensconced town, they found a solitary figure sitting on a park bench. She was rather

short with them when they spoke to her.

BALAN WONDERWORLD™

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I Unexpected Company

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The Balan Theatre appears out of nowhere.

Everyone visits this strange playhouse once or twice over the course of their life, and everyone meets Balan, the mysterious maestro with a smile like a shared secret. Even you, though you wouldn't remember.

No one does.

The Beginning

Out on the street, the dancers worked through their routine, perfectly in sync thanks to their long days of practice. Every move met with cheers from the gallery.

Past this spectacle went a young boy.

“Hey, Leo,” called one of the performers. “Come dance with us.”
It wasn't the first time the dancers had tried—and failed—to get the boy to join in. He ignored this invitation as he had ignored all the rest and walked by the dancers without so much as a glance.
For a street troupe, the dancers were surprisingly good. But to the boy, they were no better than amateurs.
He kept his eyes downcast and walked.
Last night, the skies had been filled with shooting stars.
Dubbed the Eltrandos, everyone in town had oohed and aahed up at the storm of meteors filling the night. Everyone, that is, except the boy, who

walked with his eyes downcast then as he did now. He didn't understand why everyone was making such a fuss over something as mundane as rocks.

The boy's gaze shot up to an alley he had passed—and ignored—hundreds of times.

Something about it called to him.

He turned down the alley.

After a couple steps, he saw some sort of light up ahead.

The boy knew this town like the back of his hand. Last time he checked, there hadn't been anything down this alley except a vacant lot.

He kept going.

Surprise stopped him in his tracks. The alley led to a strange building he had never seen before.

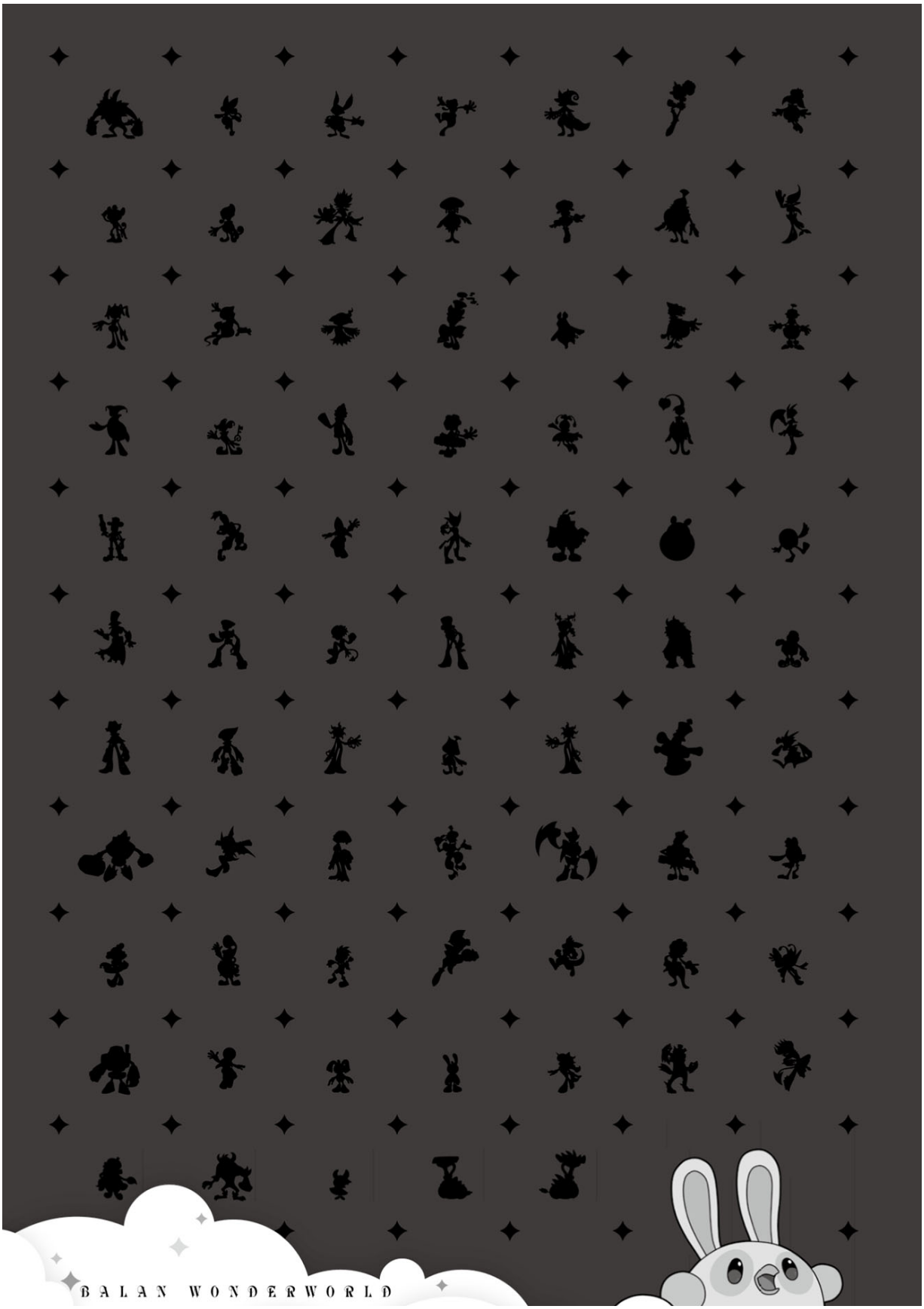
It was a theater, and a huge one, too. Yet he hadn't heard anything about its construction. Dozens of neon signs flashed on its façade, but he didn't see a single person inside or out. It felt like time itself had stopped.

He peered through one of the windows. Unexpectedly, the front doors opened wide, as if in invitation.

The boy felt hundreds of eyes on him, watching, waiting—but when he looked around, there was no one there.

He hesitated for a moment, then relented to the invisible force coaxing him inside.

The doors closed slowly behind him, and the boy vanished from the world.


BALAN WONDERWORLD

I Unexpected Company

The boy set his music player on the sidewalk and switched it on. An up-tempo song began to play, and his body moved to the rhythm.

For a long time, he danced.

He wanted to move like no one ever had before, to accomplish acrobatic feats no one else could.

Beautiful downtown was his stage. A plethora of stores took up the first floors of the four-story brick buildings, but there wasn't even so much as a window-shopper in sight. There was only the boy, dancing where he always danced. In this world—in Wonderworld—you could dance and dance and never tire, never get sleepy. The boy had lost track of how many hours—or days? years?—he had been dancing.

At some point he noticed a shadowlike creature at his feet staring right at him. Its black body bore some sort of strange patterning. It had legs and feet, though it looked unlike any animal the boy had ever seen. This one beside him was about the size of a large dog, though others loomed much taller than the boy.

There were all sorts of these shadow beasts around. Every one came in a peculiar shape, and they gave him an unsettled feeling if he looked at one long enough, but they never seemed to actually *do* anything, so he never paid them much mind.

The boy stopped dancing and stared back at the shadow.

Its attention turned to a shimmering drop on the sidewalk.

It was a crystal about as big as a rugby ball, but the shadow stretched wide its maw and gulped the drop down in one bite.

Drops were always showing up when you least expected them. There were red ones and yellow ones, and you couldn't ignore the violets—in fact, they came in every color of the rainbow, glittering something pretty. It wasn't any great loss for one to get swallowed up by a shadow. There were more where that one came from. Besides, beyond being shiny, the boy did not even know what the drops were.

Nor did he particularly care. So long as he could keep dancing, he was satisfied.

Still, though he got to do what he wanted when he wanted, a strange sort of unease would sometimes creep over him.

He started dancing again to shake it off, but an image flashed through his mind, disrupting his focus.

Huh…!?

The vision shocked him out of the rhythm. His feet tangled, and he fell to the ground.

What was that!?

His heart drummed wildly inside his chest.

He drew long, deep breaths, trying to remember what he had seen.

I think….there was a girl?

She might have been thirteen, maybe fourteen—right around his age—but he was certain they had never met. After all, there was no one else around. This was his stage, and his alone.

Behind the girl in his vision had stood a strange, shadowed figure: tall, face split in a large grin, and a top hat pulled down over his eyes. The boy was certain he had never met this man, either.

He had no idea who either of them were, but thinking about them made his heart start pounding in apprehension all over again.

He shook his head, trying to clear the vision from his mind.

I'm just imagining things.

Yet the uncomfortable tightness in his chest would not abate.

He drew in a long breath.

Someone called his name. He turned to look and saw a tall man dressed in handsome white clothes and a billowing cloak.

Lance.

He would visit the boy's stage from time to time and always bore the same gentle smile. The shadows never spoke, meaning Lance—“Wonderworld's maestro,” as he put it—was the only person the boy could talk to.

Lance flashed his usual smile and brushed his long, silver hair out of his face.

“Well now, what ails my poor chum?” he asked. “You're crouched here all alone, looking rather glum.”

“Nothing.”

The boy stood, glancing away.

Lance always spoke so kindly to him, and always lent a hand when he needed it. The boy didn't want to bother him with something as lame as his imagination acting up.

“Are you sure?”

Lance leaned in close, his deep blue eyes searching the boy's.

“I was just thinking this place could use a little something,” he lied.

“For instance?”

“Like…some props for my routine. For some of the more acrobatic moves…”

“In the streets?”

“You know, like maybe fire hydrants or something.”

“An idea most grand. I say do it—this is, after all, *your* stage to command. Alter it however you see fit. You recall how I showed you the trick of it?”

The boy pointed to a street corner, envisioning what he wanted in his mind. A second later, a fire hydrant sprang into existence.

“Something like this,” he said. Lance smiled at him.

“Why stop there? Change this whole place if you like—add your own flare! This is my Wonderworld, and here on this stage, you call the shots. But should the need arise, ask for my aid with no second thoughts. For such a dear friend, both my hands I would gladly lend.”

With a slight flourish of his hand, Lance disappeared.

As soon as he was out of sight, the boy let out a sigh of relief.

It was not that he disliked Lance. The boy appreciated his help, and Lance was the absolute nicest. It was just that he liked being alone better. It was easier to relax without other people around.

The boy drew in another breath and started to dance.

He would dance for as long, for as much as he wanted.

He planted one hand atop the brand-new hydrant and swung himself up into a handstand.

I don't need anything else to be happy. Just this—just dancing.

Someone started clapping.

The sound of it nearly startled the boy into tumbling off the hydrant. He steadied himself at the last minute and jumped gracefully back down to the street, looking around. There, still clapping, stood a girl. She was around ten, with a bow in her turquoise hair and wonder in the round eyes that stared at him.

The boy's mouth fell open.

Aside from the shadows and Lance's occasional visits, the boy had never seen anyone or anything else here.

“Who are you?”

“You mean you don't know from looking at me?” The turquoise-haired girl tilted her head. “I'm Clocktower Kid.”

“You can't tell someone's name just from looking at them.”

“Sure you can. Um…let's see…you're…Streetbeat, right?”

“Not even close.”

“Then what *is* your name?”

My…name?

Lance had only ever called him “you,” and without anyone else around, not having a proper name wasn't a big deal. He never even knew he *had* a name until Clocktower Kid told him so.

“See, I knew it. You *are* Streetbeat. That's what I'm calling you.”

“Fine,” said the boy, even though it had a kind of old-timey ring to it. He needed a name, so it might as well be that one.

Clocktower Kid held out her hand.

The boy called Streetbeat shook it.

“You could kiss the back of my hand if you wanted. Like a knight.”

“Why? You don't look like royalty.”

Her expression creased into a slight pout.

“So, uh. Clocktower Kid, was it? Where'd you come from?”

“My stage.”

“You have a stage, too?”

“Course I do. You really don't know *anything*, do you? Bet you don't even know what those are.”

She pointed to the shadow, which looked to be in the middle of snuffing along the ground for more drops to eat.

Streetbeat shook his head.

“They're called Negati.”

“You get them on your stage, then?”

“Yeah. They're all over, on everybody's stage.”

“Wait—so there are *more* people?”

“Why wouldn't there be? There are tons of people in Wonderworld, all living on their own stages. But everyone's super friendly, so we go play on each other's stages a lot.”

Streetbeat couldn't believe it. Lance had never mentioned anything about that to him, not even once. “I had no idea.”

Clocktower Kid gave him a confused look.

“You've been in Wonderworld this whole time, and never once thought there might be stages besides yours?” She huffed. “You must not be interested in other people, huh?”

He considered this for a moment, then nodded.

“I don't think I am. I'm happy dancing by myself.”

“Really? But going to other stages and making new friends is so much fun!”

“How do you even get to someone else's stage, anyway?”

“There are hidden passageways that connect them. I've been in Wonderworld for *forever*, so I've found a whole bunch of secrets like that.”

“What do you mean, forever? How long have you been here?”

Clocktower Kid tilted her head ever so slightly to one side.

“Dunno. But quit asking me questions and show me around your stage already!”

Streetbeat took her on a tour. It didn't take long; his stage was only a few blocks surrounded by an endless expanse of nothing.

“This place is teeny.”

“It's plenty for dancing.”

“If you say so… Anyway, want to check out my stage? And after that I can introduce you to some of the others.”

“Uh… Sure, I guess.”

It sounded like a pain in the butt, and he didn't really care about meeting other people, but for so long Streetbeat had assumed his was the only stage in all of Wonderworld. Now that he knew different, he couldn't help but be a little curious.

“Cool! Then follow me.”

Clocktower Kid took the lead down the street.

“So how are we leaving? Is there an underground tunnel or something?”

Clocktower Kid shook her head.

“Nope, no tunnels. It's all in how we move. That's the key to opening the invisible doors to other stages. First you walk straight ahead for ten steps… then turn left for eight…”

She crossed the street and went down an alley, then vaulted herself over a squat wall. She was light and quick on her feet, so fast that Streetbeat had to scramble to keep up. This way and that they zigged and zagged. He did his best to remember all the turns.

Clocktower Kid leapt nimbly off a wall.

“What are you, some sort of cat?”

“Don't!” she shouted.

She crouched down, trembling, and covered her ears.

“Don't say that! I'm not listening!”

She curled in on herself even more, shaking violently.

“Clocktower Kid? Hey, are you okay?” No matter how many times Streetbeat called her name, she would not respond.

“I'm forgetting what you said,” she mumbled at last, closing her eyes. “Forget… Forget… Forget!” Then, “All forgot,” she said, and stood straight up.

When she looked back at him, there was no trace of her earlier terror anywhere on her face.

“What's with you, Streetbeat? You gotta keep up or it won't work.”

So, she really had forgotten his cat comparison, and what hearing it had done to her.

Streetbeat had no clue what had just happened, but Clocktower Kid had started walking again, so he followed.

Whatever the reason, hearing the word “cat” seemed to upset her, so he resolved not to say it in front of her again.

They walked along the wall for a while before turning a corner, and as they did, the scenery *changed*.

“Where *are* we?” said Streetbeat, amazed. There ought to have been a hamburger shop right in front of them, but instead, it was a place he had never seen before.

“My stage.” Clocktower Kid's chest puffed out in pride. “We passed through the invisible walls between them.”

In front of them sprawled a huge plaza, in the middle of which stood a beautiful clocktower. Here and there Streetbeat could see Negati. That

much, at least, was just like his stage.

Strolling along the street in front of the clocktower were people, though their bodies were partially see-through. Streetbeat realized these insubstantial people must be of Clocktower Kid's creation.

And it wasn't just people walking around, but stuffed animals and dolls, too.

“Did you make all of this?”

“Sure did,” she said, nodding. “I like all the hustle and bustle. Lance showed me how to do it. You want me to show you?”

Streetbeat shook his head.

“I'm good.”

“If you say so.” Clocktower Kid did not seem convinced, but she let it go and began the tour of her stage.

It was different from Streetbeat's in every way imaginable, though he had to admit, it was beautiful.

Clocktower Kid had pulled out all the stops. Tied around the streetlamps were bows of every color, and the benches all had covers on them embroidered with cute designs and characters. Teddy bears and fuzzy mice and all kinds of stuffed animals sat on the benches, chattering away. Streetbeat was not surprised to notice there were no stuffed cats in sight.

It was nice, but it wasn't the sort of stage he would have designed for himself. He sniffed the sweet-smelling air, feeling a little out of place.

“What do you think?”

“It's…something else,” he demurred.

“If you want to go back to your own stage, all you have to do is go down the path we used to come here, but backwards. For example, we went ten forward and eight right to get here, so to go back you'd have to go eight forward and ten left.”

“What a surprise to see. Taking field trips to other stages, are we?” called a voice behind them.

Streetbeat whirled and saw Lance. He hadn't even noticed the man's appearance.

Lance flourished a hand in his usual graceful greeting and smiled. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Am I in trouble?”

For some reason Streetbeat felt like he should have asked Lance's permission before going to someone else's stage.

But Lance only shook his head.

“Perish the thought. When have I ever told you what you can or cannot? If you want to do something, do! Far be it from me to control you.”

“Well, it's just—you never told me there were other stages.”

Lance gave a shrug.

“Simply knowledge you never sought. You preferred to be left to your stage and your dancing, did you not? You didn't ask, and I didn't tell.” Lance glanced to Clocktower Kid. “I do hope all here is well.”

“Everything's great,” she replied, smiling at him.

“Wonderful, splendid, fantastic and grand! But should you need me, call my name, I'll lend you a hand.”

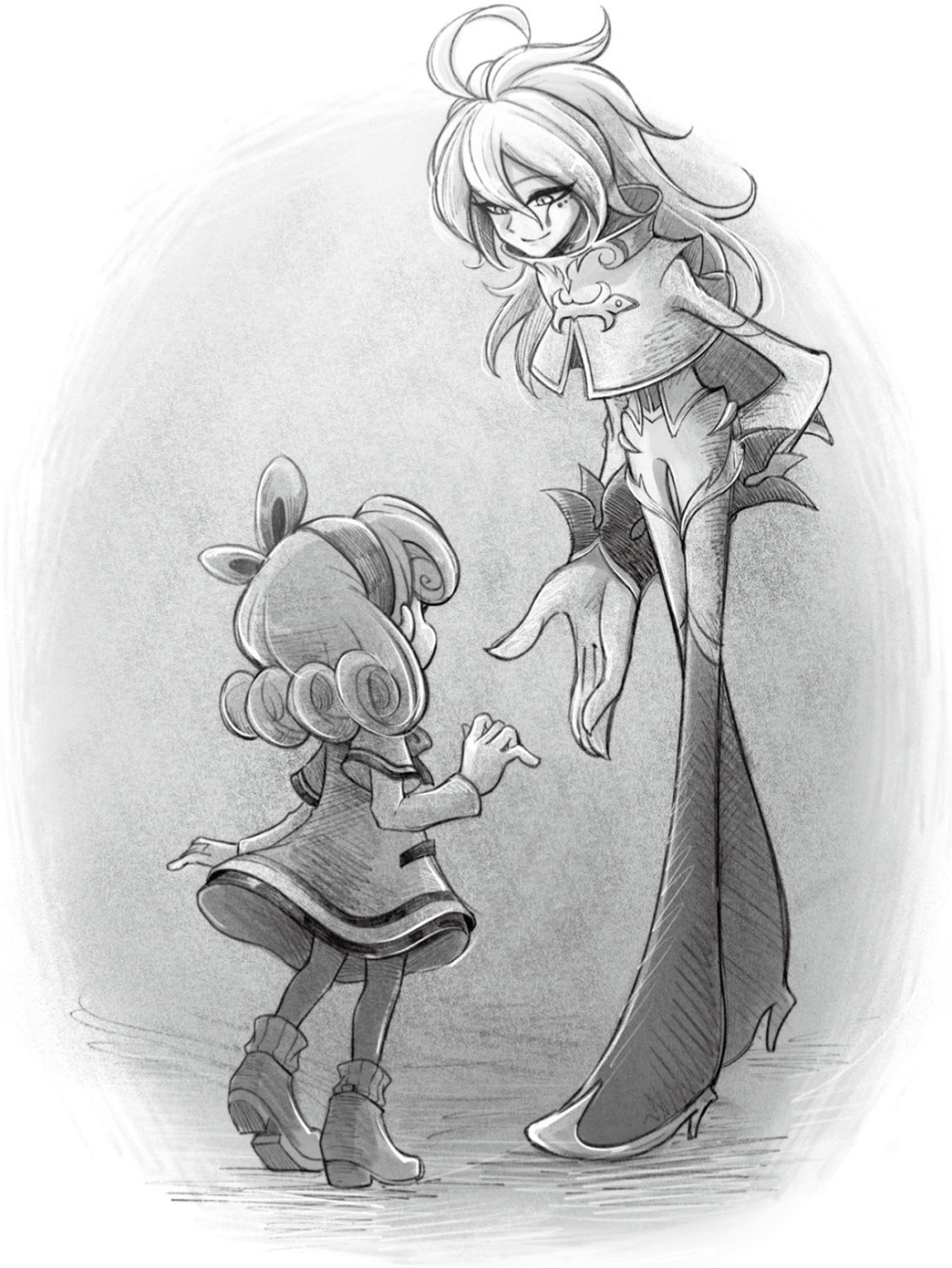
“Okay. Hey, how do you like my stage?”

“It is more exquisite each time I visit!”

Lance smiled. He really looked like he meant it.

“I know, right? I mean, look at that teddy bear! Isn't it just the cutest?”

With a satisfied sigh, she pointed to the one of the many stuffed animal seated upon one of the benches.



“It is so, it is so! How I love watching your stage bloom and grow. Seeing you little ones happy brings such joy to my heart, though I am afraid it is time now for me to depart. I'm sure when next I come to see all the sights, you'll have created even more amazing delights!”

With that, Lance spun gracefully on his heel, and vanished.

“Do you like him?” asked Streetbeat.

Clocktower Kid nodded.

“He's really nice, and handsome, and he taught me how to change my stage and everything.”

“So you're happy living here, too, then.”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, but… Well, lately…” Clocktower Kid shook her head. “Never mind. It's nothing.”

Streetbeat could tell she was hiding something, but he chose not to press the issue. He didn't want to get involved in other people's problems.

Besides, Streetbeat had secrets of his own. Like that strange vision he had seen. But he wasn't about to confide something like that to a little kid.

Wanting to change the subject, he pointed at one of the Negati picking up drops from the street.

“Your stage has them too. Just like you said.”

“I told you, every stage does. Oh right, I was going to introduce you to some of the others! Come on.”

Clocktower Kid started walking.

Streetbeat didn't really care about meeting other people, but he had no reason to refuse the offer, either. Plus, he wanted to figure out what was causing him to feel strangely uneasy, and what that out-of-the-blue vision was all about. Who was that girl? And the tall man in the top hat? He still couldn't remember ever meeting either of them, though now that he thought about it, the man in the top hat reminded him a bit of Lance. But Lance always had a gentle smile on his face, and the man in the top hat had been almost smirking.

“Hey—c'mon !” Clocktower Kid shouted as she rounded a corner.

Two or three turns later, the world around him changed again.

Pensive Pierrot

They were in a giant amusement park.

Streetbeat could hear a jaunty marching tune playing somewhere in the distance.

“Whose stage is this?”

“Pensive Pierrot's,” said Clocktower Kid. She took out a small mirror from her pocket, checking her hair with a slight blush on her face. “I hope you like him as much as I do.”

There were so many people here. Families with little kids in tow, lovey-dovey couples holding hands—probably all created by Pensive Pierrot. They all looked like they were having the time of their lives. The air was buttery with the smell of fresh popcorn.

“How come it was easier to get here than when you brought me from my stage to yours?”

“Probably because me and Pensive are friends. I had a real hard time finding the way to your stage.”

As she spoke, the aforementioned Pierrot came into sight.

“I knew it. I had a hunch you were here, Clocktower Kid.”

“I brought a new friend.”

Pensive Pierrot removed his grinning clown's mask, revealing a remarkably handsome young man.

“Hello, hello, and welcome to my amusement park! I'm Pensive Pierrot. You must be…Streetbeat, am I right?”

Streetbeat felt his jaw drop. “How did you know my name?”

The clown inclined his head to one side in thought. “Names are meant to be known, aren't they? Clocktower Kid was the very first person I met here, and as soon as I saw her, I knew that's what she was called. I knew her name before I even knew I had a name of my own.”

Clocktower Kid nodded. “Yeah. The first person I met was Checkered King, and we knew each other's names right away, too. They just sort of… came to us. And it's been like that with everyone I've met since. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“If you say so.”

Something told Streetbeat it was *very* out of the ordinary, but he didn't have any hard evidence to argue otherwise. In fact, he was starting to think that was just the way things worked around here.

“Well,” said Pensive Pierrot, sweeping into a clownish bow, “it's an absolute pleasure to make your acquaintance, and I do hope you enjoy yourself! You must ride the Ferris wheel first—you can take in the whole park from up there.”

As he spoke, he ushered them toward the towering structure.

With a snap of his fingers, the ride crawled to a stop.

The gondola door opened to reveal two small Negati, perched on the bench with confused expressions on their faces.

“Ah, my apologies.” Pensive Pierrot picked the Negati up, depositing them on the ground outside the gondola. “After you.”

He motioned to the now vacated seat.

Clocktower Kid lifted the hem of her skirt and dipped a quick curtsey before getting in, like a princess boarding a horse-drawn carriage.

Streetbeat and Pensive Pierrot followed.

The clown snapped his fingers again and the Ferris wheel started moving.

True to his word, you really *could* see the entire park from the top.

Roller coasters twisted and looped and spiraled. Families and couples queued for a turn on the merry-go-round. Teacups twirled in a rainbow of everchanging color. Streetbeat had always written off amusement parks as childish and silly, but looking at all this made him want to check out each and every attraction. Even the one with white-clad figures outside, beckoning passers-by into what Streetbeat figured was a haunted house.

“I never get tired of coming here,” said Clocktower Kid, rapture on her face as she gazed at the park below.

“I'm happy to hear that,” Pensive Pierrot replied with a smile. Clocktower Kid quickly turned her reddening face away.

The sidewalks below were crowded with more than just park-goers. There were Negati, too. It seemed like you could change every detail of your stage you wanted, except them.

“There're so many of them here.”

“Here, and everywhere else.”

“I never paid them much mind before, but now I can't help wonder—what's their deal?”

“They don't ever seem to do anything but look for drops.”

Without warning Pensive Pierrot started shaking, all the blood draining from his face.

“Pensive!”

Clocktower Kid grabbed his sleeve.

His eyes squeezed shut, and for a while he just shook and shook. Eventually he opened his eyes bit by bit, his breath ragged.

“Who…are they?” he mumbled.

Flashes of his own vision flitted through Streetbeat's head.

“Pensive—you saw something—some*one*—just now, didn't you?”

“So…you've seen them, too.”

Streetbeat nodded.

“Yeah. Not too long ago, I got this…vision, of a grinning man in a top hat and a girl.”

“That's them. Was it your first vision?”

Streetbeat nodded again.

“This was my second. But it wasn't just the man in the top hat and the girl. There was a woman with long silver hair, too. I didn't get a good look at them though, everything was all…fuzzy.”

“Huh… I never saw a silver-haired woman.”

“You didn't?” Pensive Pierrot looked surprised to hear that. “Ever since my first vision of her, I've had this…sort of…*yearning*. Like I want to be near her, but I can't close the distance between us. It makes me feel so—so very lonely.”

His eyes were fixed on something very far away. Clocktower Kid tugged on his sleeve. “You're not alone. You've got me.”

Seeming flustered, the clown gave a quick nod. “I know. I don't feel so lonely when you're around. But I've always wondered why everyone calls me ‘Pensive Pierrot,’ and now I think it's because…because I'm always thinking. About her.” He let out a small sigh. “Even though I've never met her.”

A sorrowful look crossed Clocktower Kid's face. “Then you should just forget about her.”

The clown let the comment go by without response. “But what about you?” he said to the girl. “Have you seen anything?”

For a few moments, she did not answer.

“I've seen them,” she said at last. “That creepy grinning man in the top hat, and the girl. She looks like she's the same age as you, Streetbeat. Her name is Fighter. I never said anything because I didn't want you to think I was weird, Pensive… But there was a really scary creature, too. It was mostly in shadow, so I couldn't really tell what it was, except that it had pointy ears.”

Streetbeat wondered if it had been a cat she'd seen, but kept the thought to himself. He did not want to send her into another panic like before.

“So, it's not just me, then. All three of us have had visions of the same grinning man and girl… It has to mean something, but what? And why are we each seeing something slightly different? The silver-haired woman for me, the scary creature for Clocktower Kid… Did you see anything else, Streetbeat?”

“Me? No, I didn't… But how many people are there in Wonderworld? People like us, I mean.”

“Clocktower Kid and I have met twelve, including you. And there's signs of one other, but no one's ever been to their stage.” Pensive Pierrot folded his

arms over his chest. “Something's up. Maybe I ought to talk to the others. That grinning man and the girl called Fighter could be dangerous.”

“You shouldn't go alone,” said Clocktower Kid, grabbing the clown's sleeve.

“Yeah, you're right. I'd feel better if you were with me.” At that, Clocktower Kid's face turned red again.

“You coming, Streetbeat?”

Streetbeat didn't really care about meeting the others or seeing their stages, but he couldn't *not* care if something weird was about to happen to Wonderworld. It would really suck if it got in the way of his dancing, just when he'd finally gotten into a good groove.

“Yeah, sure. I'm coming.”

“So, where should we start? If we're going to visit everyone, it could be kind of a pain, but first—”

Pensive Pierrot put a finger to Clocktower Kid's mouth to stop her.

“Hold on. There's something Streetbeat needs to take in for himself.”

Clocktower Kid tilted her head at him, but understanding soon blossomed over the confusion on her face. “Gotcha,” she said, and started walking.

Pensive Pierrot followed, keeping pace with her as they headed toward whatever destination he apparently had in mind.

Streetbeat hurried after them but found himself glancing back over his shoulder as he went.

He couldn't put his finger on it, but he had the oddest feeling that something was missing from Pensive's amusement park.

It was quiet. That jaunty marching tune from earlier had stopped.

Scarecrow

The stage changed.

The scent of soil permeated the air.

In front of them stood a wooden arch, beyond which stretched nothing but corn and more corn. The verdant stalks looked still too early to harvest. Negati wove through the fields picking up the drops scattered here and there on the ground. Just like in Streetbeat's stage.

An old-fashioned farmhouse squatted in the middle of the fields.

A middle-aged man in overalls and a straw hat sat in a rocking chair on the front porch. He must have noticed Streetbeat and the others because he was waving.

They waded through the sea of corn toward the farmhouse.

“Howdy, Clocktower Kid, Pensive Pierrot. And…” The man paused his rocking, squinting at the boy. “Streetbeat, I reckon?”

“Is there anyone who *doesn't* know my name?”

“Why don't you try guessing his?” said Pensive Pierrot, almost teasingly.

“Seriously?” Streetbeat didn't think it would work, but he decided to humor the clown anyway. He stared at the older man long and hard. A name popped into his head. “Um…Scarecrow?”

“You betcha!” The man clapped a hand to Streetbeat's shoulder.

“Hi, Scarecrow. How've you been?” said Clocktower Kid. A broad grin lit Scarecrow's face.

“Oh, just fine, just fine, thanks for asking. Whiling away the hours just staring at my fields.” He motioned for them to have a seat in the other chairs on the porch, then got up and opened the front door. “Coffee good with you, Pensive? And I've got plenty of milk for Clocktower Kid… Scratch that, you go for tea when you two visit together, ain't that right?”

“I *always* have tea,” corrected Clocktower Kid, faintly glaring at the farmer as if he let slip something he shouldn't have.

“Shucks, I plum forgot,” he said, scratching the back of his head. Pensive Pierrot chuckled.

“What'll it be for you, Streetbeat?”

“I'm good with whatever.”

“Don't be shy, now. I gotta make a good first impression.”

“In that case, I'll have a ginger ale.”

“Back in two shakes,” said Scarecrow, and disappeared inside.

The three of them reclined on the porch.

“I like this stage. It's quiet. A clown can relax here.”

“Yeah, it's nice.” Streetbeat nodded. His gaze wandered over the sheds, the various farming equipment left out here and there, and a windmill for pumping water, unmoving while someone tinkered away at it. Everything left him feeling oddly wistful.

“Hope you're thirsty.”

Scarecrow reappeared with a tray bearing coffee, tea, and a glass of ginger ale.

“Make yourselves at home.”

The farmer eased himself back down onto his rocking chair. “So,” he said to Streetbeat, “tell me about your stage. What do you get up to over there?”

“It's just a normal city street, full of shops and stuff. But I don't go shopping. I just dance.”

“All the time? Golly, you kids sure have energy to spare. Me? I like to sit on this here rocking chair and look out at the fields. Spend my days peaceful-like.”

Pensive Pierrot furrowed his brow.

“Are they all peaceful? I only ask because…well, the three of us have been seeing these odd visions.”

Scarecrow's eyes shot up from his own coffee. From his expression, Streetbeat could tell he had seen something, too.

“You mean you've seen the grinning man in the top hat, and the girl called Fighter, and them dancing trees, too?”

Pensive Pierrot tilted his head.

“Well, none of us have seen the trees. The only things our visions all have in common are Fighter and the grinning man.”

“What else was in yours, then?”

“I saw a woman with long silver hair. Clocktower Kid saw some sort of scary creature. Streetbeat only saw Fighter and the man in the top hat. Dancing trees, you say…”

A frown dug a deep trench across Scarecrow's face.

“Them dancing trees… They want to take everything from me. Three times I seen them now, and every time, they get closer.…”

Clocktower Kid clasped her hands to her chest.

“What do you think it means?”

The farmer released a sigh.

“Beats me. Reckoned I was imagining things, but if I ain't the only one seeing these visions…”

“Yeah, I'm worried about the others, too. The three of us are going to pay everyone a visit, see if we can't find out anything else.” Pensive Pierrot stood from his chair. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“Moseying on already, are you?” Scarecrow rubbed a hand along his jaw, deep in thought. “Reckon you ought to head to Bugsy's stage next. It's the closest one to mine.”

“That's the plan. Thanks for the lovely tea, Scarecrow,” said Clocktower Kid, curtseying.

Scarecrow stood and waved as they waded away through the cornfields. Clocktower Kid kept turning around to wave back until he disappeared from sight.

“So, the stages aren't all just connected the same way?”

“Nope. For whatever reason some are easier to get to, depending on where you leave from. Like, it'd be a pain to get to Pensive's stage from here, but it's super easy to get to his from mine.” Clocktower Kid sounded pretty pleased about that. “Three steps ahead… Turn left for seven…”

Streetbeat did his best to remember the way, but a niggling sensation in the back of his mind spoiled his concentration.
Something bothered him about how Scarecrow said he spent all his time in his rocking chair, but Streetbeat couldn't put his finger on why.

Bugsy

The stage changed again.
They were in some sort of forest.
The air didn't smell like farm soil anymore, but like leaves and tree bark.
Trees of all shapes and sizes towered on every side of them, and at their feet blossomed beautiful flowers. Clocktower Kid poked at an adorable little mushroom; its umbrella-shaped cap deflated as out from the folds puffed sweet-smelling spores. After a few seconds, the cap ballooned back out.
“Cool, huh? I call them aroma-shrooms. They smell different depending on the color.”
She poked and prodded mushroom after mushroom.
Curious, Streetbeat decided to try poking one for himself.
But before he could, a voice called out from behind them.
He spun around and saw a girl of about his age with a shy smile on her face.
“Hi, Clocktower Kid. I knew it was you as soon as I smelled the aroma-shroom. Good to see you too, Pensive. And…” The girl—Bugsy—fixed her eyes on Streetbeat. “Um… Streetbeat. Nice to meet you.”

“Uh, yeah. Same.”

He gave her a quick dip of his head in greeting.

“It warms the cockles to see you well, Your Bugsyness,” said Pensive Pierrot, sweeping a bow that would put any court jester to shame.

“What do you think of my stage, Streetbeat?” said Bugsy, stifling a giggle at the clown's antics.

Streetbeat cast his eyes around the forest. It was not densely wooded, so there was plenty of sunlight filtering in through the leaves.

And, unsurprising for a stage belonging to a kid called Bugsy, the place was crawling with bugs: beetles, ladybugs, ants…all of them as big as puppies. And there were swarms of Negati, too. Just like on every other stage.

“It's nice. I like bugs, too.”

Bugsy grinned, then took them on a tour. Grasshoppers, perhaps startled by the group's footfalls, lept from their path.

She showed them her favorite pond, where dragonflies big enough for a person to ride on glided gracefully across the surface.

There were even *spiders*, which Streetbeat expected most girls would loathe. Their lacey webs were not sticky at all, he found, but melted like snow under his touch.

“The webs aren't for catching anything,” explained Bugsy eagerly. “Here on my stage, I wanted all the bugs to live together in harmony. That means no one is anyone else's snack.”

Streetbeat thought that was sweet, but something else was weighing on his mind.

He expected no less for a girl called Bugsy to populate her stage with a bunch of, well, bugs—but there was one species missing. He had not seen a single butterfly since arriving.

His curiosity had ballooned since that realization, but something told him he shouldn't bring it up.

I mean, what if Bugsy reacts to the word "butterfly" the same way Clocktower Kid reacted to "cat"?

Pensive Pierrot and Clocktower Kid had known her longer, so they probably knew the deal with Bugsy and butterflies.

That would explain why they also refrained from commenting on it.

I wonder if they think there's a word they shouldn't say around me*, too? But what word would that be?*

He wanted to ask about it, but something told him he shouldn't bring *that* up either.

Instead, he asked if Bugsy had had any visions featuring the grinning man and the girl called Fighter.

The smile took flight from Bugsy's face.

"Yeah, I…I've seen them. Three times. I didn't mention it because I didn't want anyone thinking I was weird." Her eyes brushed timidly over each of them. "Same reason you never said anything, right?"

Streetbeat nodded.

"Was there anything else you saw? In your visions?"

A shiver rippled over her.

“There was this…creature, sort of snaking around, like it was trying to find me. I was so scared it was going to eat me or something. Every time I have the vision, it's closer. Sooner or later, it's going to get me, I just know it.” Bugsy trailed off.

“Something bad is happening in Wonderworld, isn't it?” said Clocktower Kid.

At her question, Pensive Pierrot let out a frustrated sigh. “Or something bad is *about* to happen. Whatever's going on, we need to find out more. Do you want to come with us, Bugsy?”

Her hands clasped to her chest, Bugsy shook her head.

“If something bad's going to happen, I don't want to leave my stage.”

“I understand.” The clown gave her a reassuring smile. “We'll let you know what we find out. In the meantime, if anything happens to your stage, you can take refuge in my amusement park. We'll figure this out, okay?”

The clown waved farewell, and off they went.

Watcher of the Woods

The next stage was a forest, too, but it wasn't anything like Bugsy's.

This forest was deep and dark, with but tiny slivers of sunlight able to cut through the thick foliage. The only way of walking through the trees was via the rope bridges strung between them. It was upon one of those bridges Streetbeat and the others now stood.

He glanced over the side of the bridge. It was hard to judge just how high they were.

When he looked up, he saw tiny treehouses dotting the branches.

“Hiya,” came a woman's voice above them.

Streetbeat saw a tall woman, her head wrapped in a bandana, whom he guessed was somewhere in her thirties. With nimble movements, she maneuvered herself down the tree toward them. She had a welcoming smile on her face.

Streetbeat stared at her.

“You must be…Watcher of the Woods?”

“Yep, but you can just call me Watcher. Wonderful to meet you, Streetbeat!” She clapped a friendly hand on his shoulder.

“You're getting good with the name thing,” said Pensive Pierrot, smiling.

“Why are you called Watcher of the Woods?”

“Wish I knew.” She tilted her head to one side, thinking. “Maybe it's because I spend all day patrolling the trees.”

“What are you patrolling for?”

“You know, to make sure nothing…bad, or anything, happens.” Watcher snorted. “Though it's not like anything bad ever happens in Wonderworld.”

Pensive Pierrot frowned.

“I don't know about that. There's something we wanted to ask you, Watcher.”

Seeming to glean the gravity of the situation from the clown's tone, she said, “Let's talk at my treehouse,” and led the way.

Streetbeat and the others climbed up after her, putting their hands and feet on the same places Watcher put hers.

Higher and higher they went, and higher still, until the entire forest spread out beneath them.

Streetbeat knew they were climbing one of many gigantic arbors, but from up here it was impossible to tell just how high above the ground they were, or even how much further the tree towered into the sky. He remembered watching a line of ants scampering up a tree by the side of a road once and felt as tiny as they had been.

He had to hand it to Watcher for creating something so incredible, but at the same time, he noticed something missing.

He couldn't keep his curiosity lidded. “Pensive,” he whispered, “there aren't any birds.”

“*Shh*,” hushed the clown, putting a finger to his lips. “You probably know this already, but pointing out what's different about someone else's stage is bad manners.”

“So, there's like, a rule against it or something? Who decided that?”

“It's not something anyone ‘decided,’ so to speak, we just—we can't talk about it.”

Up until now, Streetbeat thought everyone could change their stages to be whatever they wanted. That everyone lacked for nothing and spent their time exactly as they wished.

But maybe that isn't true…

“O…kay. So that means there's something different…something *missing* from my stage, too.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I've never been to your stage, so I wouldn't know,” Pensive Pierrot mumbled.

Watcher's treehouse was something else. Streetbeat could tell it had been constructed very carefully, to avoid damaging the tree in which it was built. Inside there was a small table and a cozy bed.

“Sorry, I couldn't build the treehouses any bigger without risking hurting the trees. Still, it's just the right size for one person, don't you think? That said, I know it doesn't leave much room for chairs, so—pull up some floor.”

Watcher perched on the edge of her bed. Pensive Pierrot sat in the opposite corner, and Clocktower Kid and Streetbeat sat beside him. The three of them took up the entire floor of the treehouse. Clocktower Kid sat squished beside the clown.

“Sorry again, I know it's a squeeze.”

“Not at all,” said Pensive Pierrot. “It's a lovely treehouse. Now, to the matter at hand…” He took a breath.

“Are you here to ask about the visions?”

Watcher's words caught Streetbeat off guard.

“How did you know?”

“Because I've never seen you without a smile on your face, Pensive, and right now you're frowning so hard *I* can feel it. Soon as I noticed, that's when it hit me that I might not be the only one who's had these weird visions.”

Pensive Pierrot gave a heavy nod.

“You've got keen eyes, Watcher, and even keener intuition.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere. Speaking of my keen eyes, in my vision I saw a girl called Fighter and a grinning man in a top hat, and some sort of giant, terrible beast. It's come to me twice now, but it never lasts longer than a second.”

“Fighter and the grinning man are the two constants between all our visions. Otherwise, we each see something slightly different.”

“Like what?”

“Clocktower Kid sees some sort of scary creature. I see a woman with long silver hair. We just came from Bugsy's stage, and she said she saw a creature snaking toward her. Said she thought it wanted to…to eat her.”

“The giant beast I saw wanted to destroy everything. That's the sense I got from it, anyway.”

Watcher shuddered.

“Any idea what it could mean?”

“Not a clue.” Watcher turned to Streetbeat. “What about you? What did you see?”

“Besides the grinning man and the girl? Nothing.”

“How strange.” She pondered this for a long minute, then lifted her head. “I don't like this. Where are you headed next? To see Sentinel of the City?”

“Yeah,” said Clocktower Kid. “His stage is closest from here and all.”

“I'll come with you,” said Watcher, leading the way out of the treehouse. “I want to make sure he's okay.”

Sentinel of the City

Dusk lingered over the city in Sentinel's stage.

It reminded Streetbeat of the town in his own stage, except there were lights on in all the windows, and inside he caught sight of people going about their evening.

Clocktower Kid stretched a hand up into the air and waved.

On the opposite side of the street a tall, muscular man with close-cropped hair returned the gesture, calling, “S'up!”

With a name like “Sentinel,” Streetbeat had thought he would look a little more imposing or something, but he was dressed in a regular old shirt and jeans, just like Watcher.

Sentinel approached the group with long strides.

“Out on patrol again?” asked Watcher.

“I mean, I *am* this city's protector,” he answered. “I keep it safe from harm, just like you keep your forest.”

He glanced over to a window. Streetbeat followed his gaze and saw people bustling about inside.

Then he caught a whiff of something tasty and wondered what they were making for dinner.

“I made all those people up. The ones inside. They'll disappear the moment their window opens. The only ones out here on the street are the Negati. But

you know, even if they aren't realy, there's just something about walking around town, seeing everyone at home being happy, that I just can't get enough of. ……Sorry, I should've said hello first! It's nice to meet you, Streetbeat.”

“You too, Sentinel of the City.”

He held out his hand, and the man gripped it in a firm shake.

“Call me Sentinel,” he said with an easy grin. “Everyone does.”

It was just like when Watcher had told Streetbeat what to call her. It wasn't just their names that were similar, but their friendliness, too.

Two protectors. Two guardians… Wonder if they're related, somehow.

“Not really sure what I'm defending the city from, if I'm being totally honest.”

“Same here, buddy.”

Watcher wrapped her arms around Sentinel in a hug.

“You two seem close,” said Streetbeat. They nodded.

“We are. It's easy to get to one another's stage, plus there's the whole thing with our names being similar. Guess that's why she and I hit it off. We hang out all the time.”

Clocktower Kid's mouth pinched in a pout.

“Mine and Pensive's stages are way closer. And who says you need matching names to be friends?”

Streetbeat got the feeling something about Sentinel's phrasing had upset her. Maybe she didn't like the reminder that “Clocktower Kid” and “Pensive Pierrot” did not have anything in common.

“True. What's in a name? None of us even understand why we just *know* them like we do.” Sentinel beamed. “Besides, everyone knows you and Pensive are inseparable.”

That seemed to cheer Clocktower Kid right up.

“Listen, Sentinel, the reason we came…” started Watcher, as she began to recount the visions they had each experienced.

“Ah… Yeah, I see them too. The grinning man in the top hat, the girl called Fighter, and the man that looks like me.”

“Someone that *looks* like you?”

“Yeah, it really bugs me. Every time I see him, I get this really awful feeling.” Sentinel's shoulders sagged. “I hate it. Before the visions, I never had anything to worry about. I could patrol my city in peace, happy as a clam.”

“I think it strange that would need to change,” came a voice from behind them.

Streetbeat turned and saw Lance, an oddly grave expression on his handsome face.

“Lance? What's wrong?”

Lance sighed.

“I came here to tell you—these things you do? You really don't have to.”

Just like on Clocktower Kid's stage, Streetbeat couldn't help feeling he had done something wrong. He explained to Lance what was going on.

“Are we not allowed to investigate what's happening to Wonderworld?”

“No, dear friend, there's no such decree.” Lance tilted his head. “I told you before, you'll never hear commands from *me*. Your happiness is my only wish, my greatest satisfaction, so I can't help but worry over your course of action.”

“Why? Will it get in the way of us being happy?”

Lance brushed his long hair back with his fingers.

“Indeed, I fear that may be the case. I can see it written all over your face. The more clues you seek to uncover, the more unpleasant horrors you'll discover.”

“But I don't think any of us will feel better until the visions stop,” pressed Streetbeat. “I want to find out what's causing them.”

“Well…if nothing I say can dissuade you, then there is nothing I can do but aid you. If ever you find yourselves in trouble, call for me and I'll be there on the double.” Lance let out another sigh, then turned on his heels and disappeared down the street.

“What should we do?” Sentinel's brow furrowed, and he cast an anxious glance over the rest of the group. “If Lance is that concerned, should we really keep going?”

“I dunno about the rest of you,” Streetbeat said, “but my mind's made up. I want to meet everyone else here in Wonderworld and figure out who Fighter and that grinning man in the top hat are. And why the rest of you all see something else, but all I ever see is the two of them.”

“Sorry, but you'll have to count me out,” said Watcher with a shake of her head. “Talking to Lance has me all sorts of worried about my forest now. I

need to get back to my patrol.”

“I need to stay in my city, too.” A stoic expression turned Sentinel's face stony as he glanced around the streets. “Someone has to protect it.”

As he followed Sentinel's gaze down the street, Streetbeat realized what was missing from the stage.

Fire hydrants.

The only reason he noticed was because he'd just created one on his own stage. Otherwise, the detail may very well have escaped him.

But he knew he probably shouldn't say anything about it.

Streetbeat had always believed Wonderworld was a land of freedom and happiness, but now he was starting to think it wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

“We'll let you know as soon as we find anything,” said Pensive Pierrot to the two staying behind, and waved farewell.

Skygazer

Streetbeat, Clocktower Kid, and Pensive Pierrot stood atop a hill overlooking Skygazer's stage.

It was covered with windmills, all a different color, all spinning round and round in the breeze.

Ahead of them was a cliff that dropped down into the sea. Streetbeat drew in a deep, appreciative breath of the salty air as he looked around. A woman

strolled along with her parasol held aloft, and families sat under tents out on the grass. Everyone was partially see-through, so he didn't think any of them were the stage master.

Clocktower Kid and Pensive Pierrot started walking straight for the cliff, though Streetbeat couldn't see anyone in that direction.

He followed after them.

“Don't tread on me, Clocktower Kid,” came a voice from their feet, startling Streetbeat.

Splayed in the grass was a bespectacled boy who looked like he could be in high school. Streetbeat guessed that since he could talk, he must be the stage master.

“Silly, I'd never step on you. You're always lying in the same place.”

“What are you doing?” asked Streetbeat.

“What's it look like, Streetbeat? Living up to my name, and gazing at the sky.” Skygazer stretched out his hand without getting up from his prone position.

Streetbeat took his hand and shook it. “Is that all you ever do?”

“Yup.”

“Don't you get bored?”

“Nope. There's a nice breeze, and plenty of clouds come drifting by to entertain me. Cumulonimbus, cumulus, nimbostratus, cirrocumulus… Cirrostratus are my favorite. I like the way you can see the sun haloing through them.”

“What about when the breeze stops and there aren't any clouds?”

“Oh, I love a good, clear sky. The longer you look at it, it changes color, ever so slowly. And for some reason, when I look out at where the sky and sea meet, my heart swells so full I could cry.”

Streetbeat gazed out over the water.

Out in the sea was an oddly shaped island.

As he looked at it, its name materialized in his head.

“Is that Cetacean Island?”

Clocktower Kid stared at Streetbeat in shock.

“Hey, it's not just people you can name now!”

“What's on that island?”

Skygazer let slip a snicker. “Who knows.”

“Didn't you create it?”

“Nope. I made everything else here, but I had Lance make that island. I mean, where's the fun in knowing every single detail about your stage? I wanted someplace mysterious, somewhere even I can't go.”

Clocktower Kid tilted her head. “You're weird. What's so great about not knowing something?”

She may not have understood, but Streetbeat thought he got where Skygazer was coming from.

The bespectacled teenager stretched a hand toward the sky.

“Cetacean Island, the sky…they're both so far away, you couldn't reach them if you—”

His hand froze.

Surprised, Streetbeat glanced back down at him; the teenager's eyes were unblinking, his teeth gritted as beads of sweat slipped down his face.

After a while, Skygazer seemed to recover from the paralysis. He went limp, his hand flopping to his chest.

“You just saw something, didn't you? A vision.”

Skygazer paused. “So, you've seen them too, then.”

“Yeah.”

Unease clouded Skygazer's expression.

Streetbeat continued, “You saw Fighter and the grinning man in the top hat, right?”

“Yeah. And this…machine. I don't know what it was. It was a big jumble of spinning gears and whirring drill teeth, and it was flying right toward me.”

Skygazer wiped the sweat off his face. “I thought I was the only one who was having these visions. Kinda nice to know I'm not.”

Clocktower Kid shuddered.

“Except for Fighter and the grinning man, our visions are all different. There's some sort of scary creature in mine, and Scarecrow sees dancing trees. Bugsy sees something slithering. Watcher sees a terrible beast, Sentinel sees someone that looks like him, and Pensive sees…um…a woman with long silver hair.”

“What about Streetbeat?”

“I don't see anyone or anything besides Fighter and the man in the top hat.”

It was getting kind of embarrassing to have to keep explaining that he was the only one whose vision was like that.

“Something must be happening to Wonderworld. Or maybe it's about to, and these visions are premonitions.” Skygazer propped himself up on his elbows. “I'm worried about Seagazer.”

“I knew you would be,” said Clocktower Kid, smiling. “You two are best friends, huh?”

“Yeah… I dunno why, but I feel like the two of us are really similar, even though we don't have a single thing in common. I mean, Seagazer's really cool, and I'm just…plain and boring.”

“You shouldn't be so hard on yourself,” said Pensive Pierrot. Then he told the teenager about Lance's warning. “Unraveling this mystery might lead us down a pretty unhappy path.”

Skygazer stood up, staring at the sky lost in thought for a few moments. “In any case, I want to make sure Seagazer's all right,” he said, and strode off.

Skygazer walked a lot faster than Streetbeat had expected from someone who spent all his time lying around. It was all they could do to keep up with him once he really got going. There were a few big boulders dotting their path, but Skygazer climbed over them no problem. He was in better shape than he looked.

He kept up the breakneck pace even once they got to Seagazer's stage. Streetbeat figured he was too worried about his friend to slow down.

Their names were similar, and their stages were close together.

Streetbeat thought there must be something connecting them, even if they themselves did not realize it yet.

Seagazer

A girl with her long hair pulled back in a ponytail sat on a beach blanketed in shore bindweed, her eyes lingering on the waves.

Skygazer rushed over to her.

As if she sensed him coming, Seagazer turned her head slowly to face him.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Why wouldn't I be?”

“I mean, because… Never mind, no reason,” he mumbled. “Pretty sea today. As usual.”

“Isn't it?” agreed Seagazer in gentle delight. “Oh—hello, Streetbeat. Wonderful to meet you.”

He shook the hand she offered.

Though she was of a sunnier disposition than Skygazer, Streetbeat got the same vibe from her as he did from the bespectacled teenager. Skygazer had been right—they really were similar.

Clocktower Kid waded into the surf until the waves lapped at her knees.

“You're still such a kid,” grinned Pensive Pierrot, then proceeded to splash into the ocean after her.

Streetbeat joined them, figuring they were leaving it up to Skygazer to explain why they were here.

A school of multicolored fish swam around their legs, nibbling softly at their bare skin.

“I've never seen water this beautiful.”

Streetbeat turned to look at Seagazer, still sitting on the beach. She and Skygazer had their heads close together and were talking in low, serious tones.

“They really are best friends, huh?”

“Maybe it's because their personalities are so alike. Or maybe something else binds them together.” Pensive Pierrot grinned. “And there's their names.”

“I keep *telling* you,” Clocktower Kid protested, pouting again. “You don't need matching names to get along with someone!”

That really gets on her nerves.…

Streetbeat had never really cared one way or another about anyone besides himself, but he was starting to warm up to Clocktower Kid.

“Whoa!” she said suddenly.

“What is it?”

Pensive Pierrot peered at her.

“Streetbeat smiled! I've never seen him smile before!”

“What?” said Streetbeat, taken aback. “I've smiled *tons*. Haven't I?”

“Not that I've seen,” said Clocktower Kid. “You're always all frowny. I didn't think you *could* smile.”

“Give me a break.”

“She's right, Streetbeat. I don't think I've seen you crack a smile once.”

The three of them debated their way back to shore, returning to where Seagazer and Skygazer sat among the bindweed.

Skygazer's glasses had slid a little ways down his nose, and he prodded them back up.

“She's all filled in.”

Seagazer shivered.

“I've had the visions, too. But in mine, there's a horrifying sea monster trying to kill me.”

“*Kill* you?' said Streetbeat, aghast. “What do you think it is?”

“I have no idea,” said Seagazer, frowning. “All I do is sit here and stare at the sea. That's it. I've never even dipped a pinky toe in the water.”

Skygazer sighed. “I'm staying here for a bit. I can't imagine any creature like that in an ocean you created, but I'm not leaving you alone when there's something out there that wants to kill you. Later you can come back with me to my stage if you want.”

Seagazer nodded.

“That sounds nice. I like looking at Cetacean Island from your cliffs.”

“You can come hang out whenever,” said Skygazer, beaming at her.

“The three of us better get going, then.”

They waved farewell.

Seagazer must have created the ocean on her stage because she liked it, but Streetbeat thought it was strange that she never even went into the water.

“So how many people are left?”

“Four, though one of them we only *think* is there, since we've never actually met,” said Pensive Pierrot. “Also, you might want to brace yourself a bit

before we go to the next stage. Its master can be a bit…well, *much*, for someone like you."

"Why's that?"

"Oh, you'll see when you meet her," said the clown with a short laugh.

Clocktower Kid took her mirror out of her pocket and started fussing with her hair.

Huh… Is she someone who cares a lot about appearances?

If that was true, then they might have a tough time getting along.

But Pensive Pierrot continued snickering.

Streetbeat was still wondering what kind of person he was about to meet when the clown knocked on the front door.

Madam of the Mansion

A man dressed in a butler's uniform opened the door.

"Welcome," he began, but was quickly pushed aside by a plump woman—Madam of the Mansion.

"Darlings! Absolutely marvelous to have you on my stage!" she beamed as bright as her clothing, ushering them all inside. "You must be Streetbeat!"

Somehow, he had ended up front and center. He tried to take a step back behind the others. "Uh, yeah. Nice to meet you."

"Lovely to see you. All of you! It's always such a pleasure. My, I can't recall the last time I hosted such a large soiree. We shall need tea and

nibbles, of course—both of which I have in ample supply—and then we can simply chat the day away!”

She spoke so quickly as she guided them through the mansion that Streetbeat could barely tell where one sentence ended and the other began. The butler bowed and strode off in another direction, most likely to fetch them drinks and snacks.

Madam of the Mansion kept her arm around Streetbeat's shoulders as she led them through her home. It was hard to tell if she was always this friendly, or if she was just especially keen on new acquaintances.

Her house was everything he would have expected from her name.

All sorts of furnishings crowded the rooms. The console tables were decorated with beautiful vases and elaborate handicrafts. Exquisite tapestries hung on the walls, and finely detailed carpets ran the length of the floors. Curtains bearing colorful floral designs framed the windows. The obvious high quality of everything on display impressed Streetbeat, even if none of it was exactly to his taste.

“We'll start with some tea and cookies before the main meal. Then we'll be able to chat as long as we like! Sit, darlings, sit,” said Madam of the Mansion, flapping her hands at them as if to push them down onto the sofas.

She, on the other hand, could not seem to sit still. Her movements were expansive, her stream of chatter endless.

Now Streetbeat understood why Pensive Pierrot had suggested he brace himself.

All of a sudden, Madam of the Mansion froze.

“*Shh*.” She pressed a finger to her lips, pointing to a corner of the room. “Can…can you see them?”

The three of them turned to see what she was pointing at.

Streetbeat stared and squinted but couldn't see anything. Yet he could *sense* the presence of…something.

“They're gone.” Madam of the Mansion let out a shaky sigh of relief.

Clocktower Kid clutched Pensive Pierrot's sleeve.

“I didn't see anything, but I could tell *something* was there. What did you see, Madam of the Mansion?”

“I'm not entirely certain myself, darling. Some sort of fuzzy creatures. Not Negati—these things are all sorts of different colors. They've started appearing every now and then on my stage, and some of them were on Checkered King's the last time I visited, too. But I only got a brief glimpse of them, so I thought I was just seeing things and didn't mention it to him at the time.”

“Something is happening to Wonderworld.” Streetbeat and the others brought Madam of the Mansion up to speed.

The blood drained from her face.

“I've seen Fighter and that awful grinning man, too. And there was also a wall in my vision. It was pitch black, and coming right at me like it meant to squish me flat.”

Pensive Pierrot let out a sigh. “Something is *definitely* happening to Wonderworld.”

“Have you spoken to Checkered King yet, darlings? As wise and knowledgeable as he is, he may be able to help figure this out.”

“Well…” Pensive Pierrot recounted Lance's warning.

Madam of the Mansion frowned.

“It seems I spoke rather hastily. Perhaps it's best to stop chasing mysteries, as Lance suggests. I shudder to think what could happen to everyone and their stages…”

Pensive Pierrot shook his head.

“I'm not giving up, not when I feel like we're on the verge of something terrible happening. Not without figuring out what's causing these visions.”

Madam of the Mansion was quiet for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was barely above a whisper. “In that case, I shall come with you. I'd like to tell Checkered King of the fuzzy creatures myself.”

Checkered King

Checkered King's stage was a town straight out of the middle ages.

Streetbeat couldn't tell if the passers-by were artisans or merchants, but all of them were dressed in medieval garb.

There were lots of kids playing, too.

Judging by the smiles on everyone's face, Streetbeat surmised Checkered King must be a fantastic ruler.

Streetbeat, Madam of the Mansion, and the others made for the king's castle.

At the gate they were met by an armored guard. “Hail, Masters Clocktower Kid, Pensive Pierrot, Madam of the Mansion, and…who might this be?”

Pensive Pierrot leaned over to Streetbeat to explain. “The people we create on our stages aren't capable of knowing our names, so you'll have to introduce yourself.”

“Oh,” he said. “Uh. I'm Streetbeat. I guess.”

“Be most welcome, Master Streetbeat. Be most welcome, one and all. You may enter.”

The guard stood at attention and gestured for the four of them to head inside the gate.

Considering he was a king and all, Streetbeat expected him to be in a crown and royal robes, but the middle-aged man that came out to greet them wore a simple coat and tie.

The woman accompanying him was in a beautiful dress and sparkling tiara.

Checkered King clapped a hand to Streetbeat's shoulder. “Hello, hello, and welcome to my kingdom, Streetbeat. Allow me to introduce my queen.”

The queen extended her hand, palm down.

Clocktower Kid nudged an elbow into Streetbeat's side. “You're supposed to kiss the royal hand.”

He did as he was told, taking the queen's hand lightly in his and pressing his lips to the top.

Her hand was see-through. He should have guessed the queen was also of Checkered King's creation.

“You've come at the perfect time. The jousting tournament is about to begin.” King Checkboard led them to the balcony.

The grounds below were crowded with soldiers.

Trumpets blared. Knights on horseback came trotting into view, some in white armor on white mounts, and others in black armor on black mounts.

A priest prayed for heavenly blessings and the safety of the jousters.

“Who will be our champion?” said Checkered King in excited tones from beside his queen.

With a flick of the king's hand, the knights charged. Black and white clashed. Spears clattered against shields. The sides were evenly matched; no apparent victor emerged.

“They're here!” cried Madam of the Mansion, pointing.

As one, they all turned to follow her finger.

This time, Streetbeat saw them.

Fuzzy round *somethings*, leaping about atop the castle wall.

At Madam of the Mansion's cry, the soldiers began scrambling every which way.

The queen clung to Checkered King.

“Seize them!” commanded Checkered King. All the knights, black and white alike, reared their horses up the stone steps.

They closed in on the fuzzy creatures from all sides, but at the very last instant, the colorful furballs vanished.

“What in the world *were* those things?”

“I've seen them before,” said Madam of the Mansion to the consternated king. “Lately they've been pestering me on my stage.”

“That is why we're here,” said Pensive Pierrot, and launched into an explanation.

Checkered King scowled.

“I've had visions, too. Of a grinning man, and a girl called Fighter…and of a golden chalice. I believe it may be the very chalice mentioned in the ancient legends. I ordered my knights to scour the realm, though hitherto none have found it. But I am concerned by Lance's warning…” The king fell deep into thought.

The tournament had started up again. Clocktower Kid watched the knights, enraptured, but Checkered King stood with his arms folded across his chest and his eyes shut tight.

The queen watched him with a worried look on her face.

After a while, the king opened his eyes.

“I've never given it much thought until now, but I've realized I know next to nothing about Wonderworld.”

“What do you mean?” asked Streetbeat.

The king sighed.

“Everyone is master of their own stage, each fashioning it in whatever way they like. All our stages are different, but they share two things in common: the drops, and the Negati that appear to take them. Oh, and every so often

Lance comes to show us how to improve our stage. Never have I wondered what the drops or the Negati *are*."

"Neither have I, now that you mention it," said Pensive Pierrot, nodding.

"And our names… Streetbeat, you said you never even knew you had a name until you met Clocktower Kid, isn't that right? Likewise, for me. The first time I realized I needed a name was when I met Clocktower Kid, when she brought Madam of the Mansion to visit. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to communicate."

"What do you mean?" asked Clocktower Kid.

Madam of the Mansion looked at Checkered King with unease pinching her face.

"Wonderworld is the name of this place, right? And we need names in order to distinguish one thing from another. So, if this world has a *name*, it must be to distinguish it from *another world*. And…" Checkered King trailed off.

"And?" prompted Streetbeat. The king shook his head.

"No, I'm spinning yarn from air. It's an outlandish theory—forget I said anything."

The way he was talking made Streetbeat want to ask more questions, but he kept silent as Checkered King fell back to thinking.

"Well, we better be on our way."

Checkered King made to move after them, but the queen took hold of his sleeve.

She shook her head, her eyes sorrowful pools.

“You're right, my dear. My kingdom needs me here. I'm sorry, my friends, but I cannot go with you.”

“I'm concerned about my mansion as well. I wish I could go with you, but I must return home,” said Madam of the Mansion, her gaze cast downward apologetically.

Invisible Custodian

“Whoa…” Streetbeat gazed around the stage, which belonged to a man called Invisible Custodian.

They stood amidst ancient ruins. Before them stood a giant temple, solemn and silent, blanketed in moss and vines. Flowers blossomed between its cracked stones. Birds flitted about its crumbling archways.

Clocktower Kid started walking toward the temple.

“This stage is just like yours, Streetbeat. All quiet and pretty.”

“This doesn't look anything like mine.”

Clocktower Kid clapped a hand to her mouth. “Yeah… You're right. I dunno why I said that.”

Her cheeks reddened in embarrassment, and she sped up away from Streetbeat.

He took the chance to look around again. Nothing but Negati picking up drops like always. There were no signs of those fuzzy creatures from before.

They came upon an older gentleman inside the temple. With a name like “Invisible Custodian,” Streetbeat had envisioned him wearing a work uniform or something, but he was dressed in a fancy suit. He had a polished cane in one hand and used the other to doff his dapper hat. “Hello, Clocktower Kid, Pensive Pierrot. How long has it been? And a pleasure to meet you, ah…Streetbeat.”

Invisible Custodian gave him a gentle smile.

“Nice to meet you too, uh, Invisible Custodian. How come you aren't, you know—invisible?”

The man laughed.

“I've no idea why I have the name I have. The ‘custodian’ bit is spot on, at least. I make sure to keep these ruins spick-and-span.”

Streetbeat wondered how dirty the ruins could really get with no one living in them, but he kept the thought to himself. Something told him it would have been rude to say.

“There's something important we came to talk to you about,” said Pensive Pierrot, and explained the visions.

“Hmmm,” said Invisible Custodian when the clown had finished.

“What have you seen?”

“The grinning man and the girl called Fighter, like you. But that's all.”

“Same as Streetbeat,” said Clocktower Kid, putting her fist to her chin in a very grown-up way. “What about the fuzzy creatures? Have you seen those here?”

“Sure have.”

He jerked his chin toward the other side of the path, where they saw partially see-through fuzzy somethings.

“They're getting more and more visible.”

Clocktower Kid's hand trembled ever so slightly.

“Something is happening to Wonderworld. Something big…”

“I don't like the sound of that.” Invisible Custodian's brow furrowed. “I'm happy with my stage the way it is—nice and quiet. I'm not keen on that changing.”

Pensive Pierrot folded his arms over his chest. “I think we need to gather everyone together,” he said. “We need to talk about this. All of us.”

“It's pretty easy for everyone to get to my stage,” offered Clocktower Kid. “How about we have the meeting there?”

Invisible Custodian agreed.

“But what about that last stage? The one all of us feel is there but haven't been to yet. Whoever lives there won't know the way.”

“We'll just have to go find them,” said Pensive Pierrot. Invisible Custodian nodded.

“All right. In the meantime, I'll gather the others.”

He waved farewell and set off walking.

“Hello, you three. Still at it, I see.”

Streetbeat whirled and saw Lance, who had appeared out of the blue, like always.

“What are you doing here?”

“To watch in silence, I can no longer bear. Please, heed this wisdom I will share.” A frown marred his beautiful face. “I warned you once, now let me say it twice: if you keep down this path, you will pay a terrible price.”

“We can't just ignore these visions, or those fuzzy things.”

Lance heaved a sigh at Streetbeat's protest. “I wish I could make you see how much all of you mean to me. Your suffering I'd do anything to prevent, so I beg you—for my sake—relent.”

“What aren't you telling us?”

Lance shook his head sadly at Pensive Pierrot. “It is best you put that question to rest.”

Streetbeat took a step forward. “Are you saying we aren't allowed to look for that stage?”

“My permission you do not need. Remember, I do not issue commands for you to heed. I am only concerned your faith in Wonderworld has started to wane. As its maestro, this brings me immeasurable pain.”

“I trust you, Lance,” said Clocktower Kid, fixing him with earnest eyes. “You mean a lot to me, too.”

“Oh, my dear, that means so much to hear.” His eyes closed as if in relief.

“Lance,” pressed Pensive Pierrot, “we just want to know the truth.”

Lance combed a hand through his long hair and let out another sigh.

“Then carry on, if that's the case. The consequences you must face. But not alone, for this I swear—when you need my help, I will be there.”

At that, Lance turned on his heel and vanished.

Pensive Pierrot's gaze lingered on where Lance had been. “Should we really keep going?” he said, folding his arms. “I know I told Invisible Custodian we'd search for the last stage, but no one's ever figured out how to get there before. I don't know what makes me think we'll find the way now…”

“Um…” Clocktower Kid pointed at something.

Past where Lance had disappeared stood a figure.

“It's…it's Fighter. She's actually here. In Wonderworld.”

Fighter, staring at Streetbeat, raised her right hand and pointed at something.

The three of them glanced at one another, then took off running toward her.

But just when they were about to reach her, she vanished.

“Where'd she go?”

When they looked where Fighter had been pointing, they saw her standing there. This time, she lifted her left hand, pointing somewhere else.

Streetbeat ran after her as fast as he could.

Again, right when he reached out to grab her, she disappeared.

“I think—I think she's showing us the way,” said Pensive Pierrot, gasping as he caught.

“The way to what?”

“The last stage. It has to be. She must know we're trying to get there.”

“What if it's a trap?” said Clocktower Kid, her eyes shining with anxiety as they looked at the clown.

“We won't find out either way if we don't follow her.”

The three of them approached Fighter slowly.

The closer they got, the more of her features they could make out.

“Her outfit looks kinda like Streetbeat's.”

“Does it?”

Again, Fighter pointed. Again, they followed. Again, she disappeared.

A dozen or so times they repeated this, until they came to the very edge of Invisible Custodian's stage, and everything went white.

Lady of the Midnight Sun

“Where are we?”

The stage changed before any of them even realized.

They stood somewhere higher up a mountain. Below they could see nestled a small village.

From the forest of conifers surrounding the village, Streetbeat judged they must be very high up.

This time, Fighter did not point. She only stood with her back to them, gaze intent on the village below.

Streetbeat ran toward her.

This time, she did not disappear.

He seized her shoulder.

“Are you…are you real?”

“I'm as real as it gets. I've been trying to figure out a way to this stage for a long time, too. To meet the one everyone sensed, but never met. The last

person you've been searching for. It hasn't been easy. Lady of the Midnight Sun has closed herself off so much, it was nearly impossible to get here. Even Clocktower Kid couldn't manage it, and she's normally pretty adept at that sort of thing.”

“Why did you help us?”

Fighter smiled.

“Getting you here is part of my job.”

“What job?”

“The one Balan gave me. One of his tests.”

“Who's Balan?”

“The guy in the top hat. You've seen him, right? Anyway,” she said, and started walking off, “I'd stick around, but I've got something else to take care of.”

“Where are you going?”

But she vanished without answering.

“What's her deal?” said Clocktower Kid, staring at the place Fighter had disappeared.

“Who knows. But at least we're here. This is the last stage, right? The one you've been trying to find for forever? Let's go meet its master—Lady of the Midnight Sun, I think Fighter called her.”

At Pensive Pierrot's suggestion, the three of them made their way down to the village.

“Another town just like yours, Streetbeat,” murmured Clocktower Kid. He pretended not to hear.

He already knew she wouldn't be able to tell him what made his stage and this one so alike, even if he asked.

The sun beamed bright in the sky.

Streetbeat figured if this stage belonged to someone called Lady of the Midnight Sun, that must mean it never sank below the horizon.

By the side of the path bloomed a summer cornucopia of flowers. He figured they must love the endless sunlight.

They came to a small park in the village center.

On one of the benches sat a woman with long blue hair.

She turned slowly toward them as they approached her.

“I don't recall inviting guests.” The faint smile on her face was belied by the coldness in her tone. Streetbeat had never seen anyone as beautiful as her.

“You're Lady of the Midnight Sun, aren't you?”

“Indeed. I don't care to deduce your names,” she replied curtly. Streetbeat floundered.

“Oh, I'm Clocktower Kid, and that's Pensive Pierrot and Streetbeat.”

Lady of the Midnight Sun's expression turned cross.

“You aren't going to leave my stage unless I tell you in no uncertain terms, are you?”

“We came because we had to.” Pensive Pierrot stood directly in front of Lady of the Midnight Sun. “Something is happening to our stages, yours included. Something bad. Bad enough that I believe all of Wonderworld may be in grave danger.”

“Grave danger?” She let out barely a laugh. “My stage is unchanged. Nothing has happened here.”

“Are you sure?” Streetbeat took a step forward. “Have you had visions of a grinning man in a top hat? Or a girl called Fighter?”

Her expression darkened.

“So, what if I have?”

“All of the stage masters in Wonderworld have seen the same vision. We're trying to find out what it means, even though Lance keeps telling us to stay out of it.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, but…but that's exactly what has us all so worried, that the Wonderworld we know and love might be destroyed.”

Pensive Pierrot pointed a finger to the park's edge, where the fuzzy creatures wriggled and squirmed.

“I know you can see those things, too. How can you look at them and still pretend nothing is wrong?”

Lady of the Midnight Sun sat on her bench for a long while, unmoving, her eyes closed in thought.

“I bet they're all over our stages by now, Pensive. I'm scared to go back,” said Clocktower Kid. The hands clasped at her chest trembled.

Pensive Pierrot lay a hand over hers to still them.

“When you're ready to go home, I'll go with you.”

Watching them, Lady of the Midnight Sun sniffed. “I'd be devastated if anything happened to my stage,” she said. “Very well. I will hear you out.”

“Everyone's gathering on Clocktower Kid's stage. Come on.”

“How, exactly?”

“Just follow me,” said Clocktower Kid, and set off walking.

Streetbeat and Pensive Pierrot followed right away, but Lady of the Midnight Sun stayed seated where she was on the bench. After a few moments, she drew herself to her feet and strode after them.

By the time they returned to Clocktower Kid's stage, everyone else was already there.

After exchanging perfunctory greetings, they dove into the matter at hand.

“What are those little furballs? You could barely see them even if you squinted before, and now they're getting clearer by the second!”

Sentinel let out a frustrated sound.

“My mansion is absolutely infested with the dratted things! They jump about as if they own the place! And now they're so distinct, I even know what they're called,” said Madam of the Mansion in a tizzy. “Tims!”

“And I've had another vision of the grinning man in the top hat and Fighter,” said Watcher. At that, Bugsy shuddered.

“Who are they, really?” murmured Skygazer, adjusting his glasses.

Everyone was talking all at once, their fears and worries blending together into anxious white noise.

Checkered King held up a hand to quiet the crowd. “I wonder if you might lend me your ears for a moment.”

“You rustled up an idea, Your Majesty?” said Scarecrow, looking out from under his straw hat at the king.

“I believe I have. You see, when Streetbeat, Pensive Pierrot, Clocktower Kid, and Madam of the Mansion came to my stage, it struck me: if Wonderworld has a name, it must be so we can differentiate it from *another* world. I know it sounds ridiculous, but what if…”

Like before, Checkered King hesitated.

“What if it were true? Then what would you do?”

Everyone turned at the sound of Lance's voice. There he stood, like he had been there the whole time, his arms crossed and a grim look on his face.

“There is indeed another world out there, as our dear monarch surmised. The one you all came from, and one you despised. It hurt you enough to cause you to flee, and now you are here, happy and free.”

Checkered King let out a long breath.

“So, this is not our original home… Of course. It never occurred to me before, but now I realize I have no memories of my childhood. I have looked like this since the very moment I first set foot into Wonderworld.”

Shock rippled throughout the gathered crowd.

“That—that can't be true,” said Seagazer, her voice wavering. “I can't believe I'm from anywhere but here…”

Uneasy glances flitted from person to person as the realization sank in. None of them had a past. They had been here for an untold amount of time, doing the same things, living the same day.

“It never would've occurred to me to wonder about that until you mentioned it,” Invisible Custodian sighed.

“But what about that grinning man in the top hat? And Fighter? And the furballs?” Lady of the Midnight Sun was the only one who kept her cool. She fixed Lance with a level stare.

“Balan is the name of the behatted man, and to expel you from Wonderworld is his devious plan. To that end he's sent Fighter, his obedient sidekick, to dismantle each of your stages, to the very last brick. And as for the furballs, the creatures called Tim…well, they also owe their allegiance to him. They are everything my dear Negati are not—polar opposites, in fact, like cold is to hot.”

“But why does this Balan guy want to make us leave Wonderworld?” asked Clocktower Kid, staring up at Lance with eyes full of fear.

“He wants to be Wonderworld's maestro, to have total control. To him, you're nothing but outsiders in the way of that goal.”

“But *you're* Wonderworld's maestro!”

“Indeed, little one, I am. It does put me in a bit of a jam.”

“Then just get rid of him, Lance!”

Lance gave a sad shake of his head. “I would if I could, but destroying him is beyond me. Your stages are the ones in danger, so only *you* have that ability.”

“You mean *we* have to fight him?” Bugsy whispered, her face falling.

“All I can do is teach you to fight and give you the strength to make things right. But are you willing to take a stand? To defend your stages with your

own hand?”

“Yes!” shouted Sentinel.

Like his cry had broken a dam, everyone from Invisible Custodian to gentle Watcher took to their feet, rallying around Lance.

Even Clocktower Kid, who was shaking, gazed in determination at the silver-haired man.

“I want to protect my stage! And Pensive's! And everyone's!”

“If on this path you have truly decided…then out from within your strength must be guided. Your memories from before I had locked away, in hopes of keeping your suffering at bay. But I must now unleash all the hurt in your heart for the sake of the power that it will impart. This power will change you from the you that you know—but you must use it to transform your stages and ensnare our foe.”

“Are you sure we can do that?” asked Bugsy, her face scrunched up in worry.

“I don't doubt it for a second, little one—see? For proof of this ultimate power, just look at me.”

He began to warp and change before their very eyes.

His pale clothing began to darken, his silver hair deepening to the darkest black. Strange markings appeared all over his body that looked just like the patterns on the Negati, except they were far more intricate and…eerily beautiful. From his back unfurled wriggling tentacles.

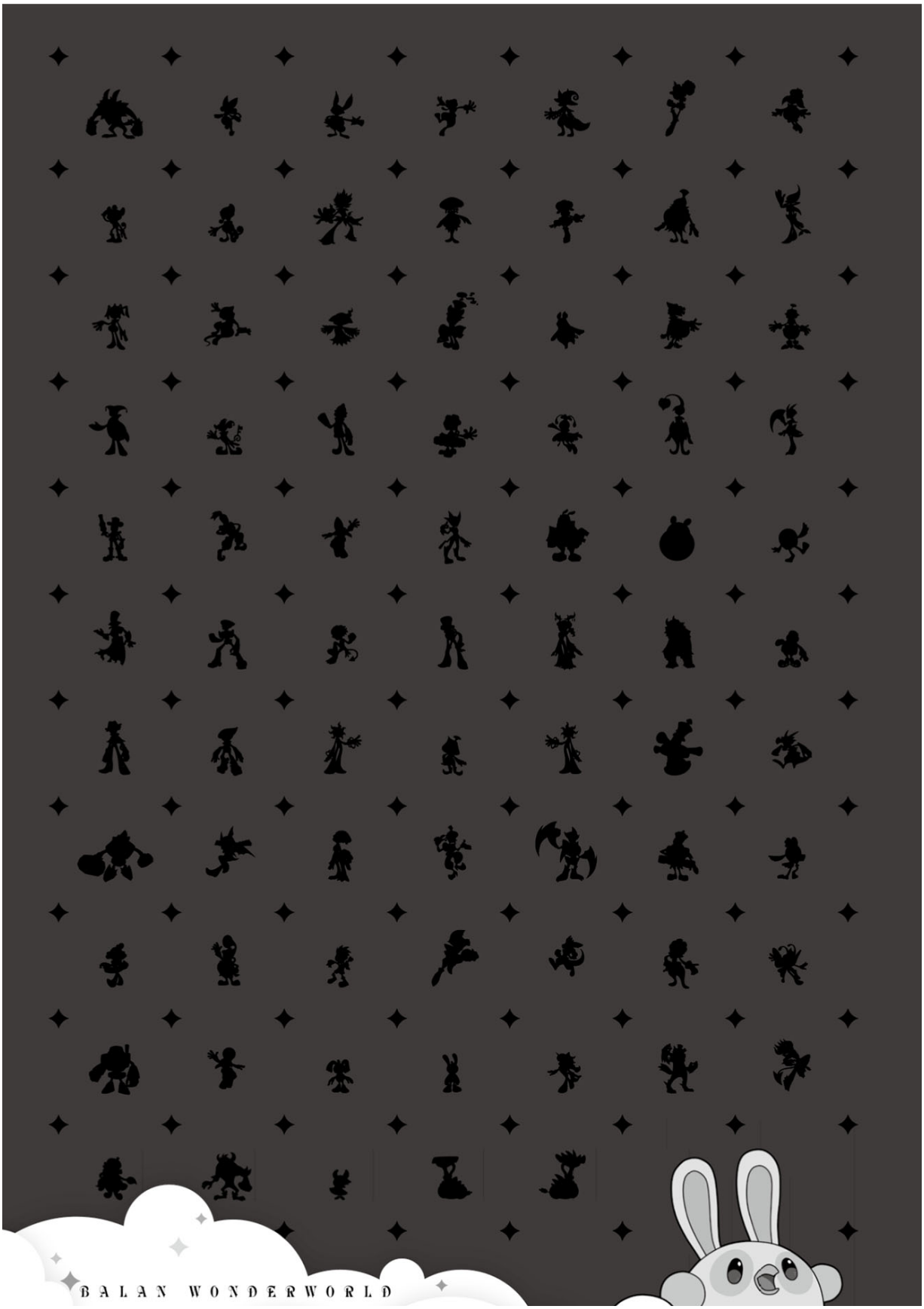
“This is my true form—behold. Now do you trust what you've been told?”

The shock of his bizarre transformation made everyone take a step back.

Sorrow flitted over Lance's face.

“Oh, my friends, have no fear—changed I may be, but I still hold you dear. This I swear on the mark that I bear.”

He touched a hand to his chest, to the glyph that was the most disquieting of them all.


BALAN WONDERWORLD

II Transformation

Clocktower Kid

With a mournful look, Lance stepped closer to Pensive Pierrot.

“Remembering will cause you so much pain. Are you sure you want to throw your happiness down the drain?”

Pensive Pierrot nodded.

Lance touched a finger to the clown's forehead. On his skin appeared the same mark Lance bore on his chest.

“It is over, said, and done. From your memories you can no longer run.”

Pensive Pierrot closed his eyes.

A few moments later they fluttered open, and he started muttering.

“I remember. Who I was, the life I led… I worked at a theme park as a clown, making people laugh. They had a parade there, and she was the star. The princess.

“Her hair was silver, her song sweet. The guests loved her, and so did the rest of the staff. She was always so kind to us, always so supportive.

“I fell in love.

“But she was the star, and I was just a common clown. Our worlds couldn't have been further apart. Sometimes her eyes would turn my way, but my face was always hidden behind the clown mask. And the only glimpses I got of her were through those tiny eye holes.

“Still, I dreamed often of telling her how I felt. I never did. I started to hate myself for being such a coward.

“Then one day, after changing into my clown costume and heading into the park, I was astonished to discover a theater in the middle of the central square.

“None of the other employees seemed to even notice it. They just walked right on by.

“The doors opened, and I felt this strange…pull. Like something was drawing me inside.

“One moment, I was in the park. The next, I was in Wonderworld.

“Now I understand why my stage is an amusement park, and what is missing from it. The march still plays, but the princess's parade…they aren't there.”

Pensive Pierrot squeezed his eyes shut again, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

“But maybe it's better this way,” he murmured. “She'll never feel the same way about me. At least here, I won't have my heart shredded to confetti every time I see her…”

Trembling, Clocktower Kid reached out and gripped Pensive Pierrot's hand.

“Forget about that princess. You and me can stay in Wonderworld together, forever and ever.”

She let go of him and strode up to Lance.

“I want to remember, too.”

Lance extended a finger.

The moment he touched her, Clocktower Kid started trembling like a leaf.

His mark appeared on her brow.

“I…I remember…

“I was walking by the clocktower when I saw the kitten on the other side of the street.”

Kitty…

“It liked me—it always let me pet it. I wasn't thinking—I said, *here, kitty kitty!* And it heard me, and started crossing the road.

“But then there was an accident in front of the clocktower—a car crash—"

Kitty!

“I couldn't move.

“The car was on top of the…

“There was so much smoke. The cars were on their side. I didn't see the kitten anywhere.

“I was too scared to look. I didn't *want* to see—

It's my fault. All my fault. If I hadn't called…

“So I ran. I ran as fast as I could away from the clocktower, and I never looked back.”

She opened her eyes. Fat tears streaked down her cheeks.

“That kitten probably d-died because of me, and I just…I just ran… I was so s-scared…”

Clocktower Kid sank into a crouch, hugging her knees tight to her chest.

“But I got to forget all about it when I came here. I got to meet Pensive and make so many other friends, even though I'm so awful. Wonderworld means everything to me. I can't let anything happen to it… And I never want to leave. I want to stay here with Pensive and everyone, forever.” When she lifted her gaze, Streetbeat saw dark light shining in her eyes. “I won't let anyone destroy our stages!”

Two glittering *somethings* shot out of her.

Then, as if the lights had been the trigger, her body began to morph—to *transform*—into a giant cat.

And as she changed, so too did her stage begin to warp and bend.

Streetbeat and the others backed away from the metamorphosis.

Lance smiled.

“Come now, dear friends, do not distress. Once Balan and his minions are defeated, your memories I will again repress. Back to normal you will return, your stages included. Then you can stay forever in Wonderworld, safe and happy, your ordeals concluded.”

He looked up at the giant cat that Clocktower Kid had become.

“The negative powers are now yours to control! For attacking your stages, you'll make the enemy pay a most terrible toll.”

The thing that used to be Clocktower Kid nodded, then loped off into the stage out of sight.

Pensive Pierrot stared after her, slack-jawed. His eyes roved her now unrecognizable stage.

“I never knew how much she cared about Wonderworld. How much she cherished *my* stage… I can't let her be the only one to take a stand. I'm going back, and I'll make whatever changes necessary to myself and my stage so I can fight!”

With that, the clown turned from them and rushed away.

“We need to face the enemy on *all* our stages!”

Sentinel and Watcher turned to each other and nodded. “We're *guardians*. It's our duty to protect our stages, even if that means turning into some horrible creature for a little while.”

They strode over to Lance.

“I shall fight too,” said Checkered King, lifting his chin. “For my queen!”

Seagazer straightened her shoulders. “I'm heading home, too. Goodbye, Skygazer. I hope we get to hang out by your stage's ocean again sometime soon.”

“I'll keep it safe for you, Seagazer, but you better protect your stage, too. It has one of the prettiest skies I've ever seen.”

They shared a smile, then turned and left.

One by one, they let Lance mark their foreheads. One by one, they returned to their stages.

Streetbeat was no exception.

Pensive Pierrot

Pensive Pierrot's memories washed over him in excruciating detail as soon as he set foot back on his stage.

The name of the theme park where he worked hit him like a punch: Christmas Rose Park.

He was still reeling from that when her title pierced him: Princess Merry.

He did not know her real name. The park managers never revealed her true identity to anyone, even her fellow employees, to maintain the illusion of mystery that kept people paying the admission fees. Still, even if he had known her real name, Pensive Pierrot could never have told her how he really felt.

But right now, all he could think about was Clocktower Kid.

Her transformation had bewildered him at first, but the shock had subsided into profound understanding for the hurt she carried.

Poor thing… She's suffered so much for such a little kid. I have to protect her stage…. I have to draw upon the negative power inside me.

A dark luminescence shimmered in Pensive Pierrot's eyes.

Two lights shot out of his body.

Then he and his stage began to change.

Streetbeat

Back on his own stage now, Streetbeat wondered, *What should I do?*

Seeing Clocktower Kid transform into a monster right in front of his eyes had really shaken him up.

Will I end up like that, too?

The thought scared him, but he shook his head to clear it.

I have to do it. There's no other way.

After all, little Clocktower Kid was willing to change so drastically to protect Pensive Pierrot's stage.

Streetbeat couldn't just sit this fight out.

Okay—change!

His decision made, the town around him started to shake, softly at first.

The sun slipped down past the horizon.

Darkness swallowed his stage. All the traffic lights switched from green or yellow to red, and everything shook harder and harder.

The apartments and shops shifted, slow as molasses. The straight roads grew warped and twisted.

The town wasn't a town anymore, but a giant maze.

Fighter and the grinning man would never be able to navigate through it.

I wonder what I look like now.

Streetbeat peeked down at his hands.

Huh?

They were still human.

He turned to face what used to be a department store, staring at his reflection in its window. It was still him.

Why didn't I transform?

On his forehead was the same symbol Lance had marked Clocktower Kid with, but otherwise Streetbeat looked the same as he always did. And no

matter how hard he tried, he could not remember anything about his life before Wonderworld.

How am I supposed to protect everyone like this?

If Clocktower Kid could transform, why can't I?

Is it because I'm scared? Am I really that useless?

At the thought, a dark light glinted in Streetbeat's eyes.

“Leo—no!”

Streetbeat turned around and saw the girl from his visions. The girl he had met on Lady of the Midnight Sun's stage.

Fighter.

Behind her stood the grinning man, top hat and all.

Streetbeat could see him clearly now. He had the same sort of aura as Lance had before Lance had transformed, though the design of his flashy outfit was completely different.

The brim of his top hat was pulled so low that Streetbeat could see nothing of the man's face except his mouth, stretched wide in its usual grin.

Fighter rushed over, but Streetbeat recoiled from her.

“Who are you?”

“It's me, Leo. It's Emma! Try to remember. We met in the Balan Theatre, in the lobby. I was trying to decide if I should go in or not.”

Her words jarred free the memories of his past.

Leo…

That's right. That's my real name. I'm Leo!

He was always dancing in the streets by himself.

Everyone in town said he was the best there was. All the different dance crews jockeyed to get him to join.

But Streetbeat—Leo never did. He didn't need anyone else to dance with. He didn't need friends.

And as it was with dancing, so it was with school. He was always alone.

And he liked it that way. He didn't care about anyone or anything except getting better at dancing. Even when the Eltrando meteor shower had streaked the night sky with shooting stars, he hadn't cared enough to look up. He'd just kept on walking with his eyes on the ground.

The next day the meteor shower was all his family could talk about. He ignored their excited conversation and slipped out of the house to dance. He had been on his way to his usual practice spot when he noticed a mysterious new alley and turned down it out of sheer curiosity.

That was when he saw a beautiful building he could have sworn had never been there before.

On its façade glowed a neon sign that read: *The Balan Theatre*.

Streetbeat-Leo knew the town like the back of his hand, all its ins and outs, all its secrets—or so he had thought. It was a shock to discover something new. He opened the door to check it out.

Inside, he met Emma.

“I remember now… You were standing there still as a statue. The two of us explored the theater together, and after that…after that…”

“Oh, little one, just look at the state of you,” said the man in the top hat, shoulders sagging. “You've forgotten yourself and what you must do.”

“What are you talking about?”

The man in the top hat shook his head sadly. “Passing through my theater brought you to this place. It's a gateway, you see, ‘twixt time and space.”

“Who are you?”

“I've lost track of how many millions of times I've introduced myself to the theater's guests. To speak the same words to the same person is something I thoroughly detest.”

“His name's Balan,” explained Emma, as the man heaved a dramatic sigh. “Maestro of all Wonderworld.”

Streetbeat-Leo furrowed his brow. “I thought Lance was in charge.”

“Most definitely not. He's only tricked everyone into thinking he calls the shots.”

Balan threw his hands into the air.

“You're one to talk about tricking people! I remember now—you said we couldn't leave the Balan Theatre unless we passed some sort of test. You locked us in!”

“I can see why you think I'm the one you should vilify,” said Balan, looking genuinely upset. “But you have it all backwards, so please, let me clarify. My theater exists for only one end: to protect people's hearts, as long as they've hearts to defend.”

“How do you protect *hearts*?”

“With great effort and care. And an extra dash of flare.” Balan struck a dramatic pose like a leading actor in the spotlight. “Everyone thinks hearts are individual islands, which is to be expected. The thing about islands, though—deeper down, they're all connected. It's what we call Wonderworld, this most happy land. What some scholars call the ‘collective consciousness,’ but who knows if any truly understand… Regardless, you cannot get here by car or by train; only through my theater, simple and plain.”

“Why did the Balan Theatre appear to me?”

“A heart is made of two pieces combined: a positive piece and a negative, balanced and twined. My theater appears when that balance goes haywire, to help people lost within straits most dire. Inside they go and inside they remain, until they pass a test to restore their heart's balance and return whence they came.”

“My heart hasn't gone haywire!”

“Oh, little one, I say this with great affection—you sorely lack in introspection.” Balan gave Streetbeat-Leo an exasperated stare. “You think you can live life all alone, without any friends to call your own.”

“So what?”

“So deep down inside you fester loneliness like a sore. But just like the others, you craved something more. You thought you could live on your stages without a care, but all the pain inside you brought negative drops to bear. And from those drops Lance's Negati drew power, grew stronger and stronger with each passing hour.”

“Who *is* Lance?”

“The product of all the chaos and war since civilization's birth—three thousand years, give or take, for what dates are worth. All those negative emotions affect Wonderworld too, and gave rise to Lance, the one who's deceived you.”

“He said he cared about us…”

Balan's shoulders lifted and fell.

“The same way a farmer cares for his egg-laying hens. It's the *drops* he loves, but that doesn't make you friends.”

“What's so special about drops?”

“The tears people in the real world cry when they're happy or sad or don't even know why. Negati and Tims need them to survive and use their power to help Wonderworld thrive.”

Streetbeat-Leo couldn't make sense of what Balan was saying.

“I…” He trailed off. His memories were coming back in a steady drip.

“I remember. After I met you in the theater, you told me I had to take a test. I had to defeat Lance and make Wonderworld go back to normal, to what it was before all the Negati corrupted it.”

Balan let out a sigh of relief.

“I was starting to think your memories might stay gone for good, given half a chance. Tell me, do you remember you and Fighter-Emma battling—and losing to—Lance?”

Streetbeat-Leo's jaw dropped. “We did *what*?”

“I tried to get you to be patient, to prepare you for the difficult brawl ahead. But no, you two ran off and fought him anyway—you're lucky you didn't end up dead.”

Streetbeat-Leo could only shake his head. “But if I lost my memories after fighting Lance, then why didn't Figh—I mean, why didn't Emma?”

Fighter-Emma smiled. “I grew up pretty spoiled back in the real world. People around me bent over backwards to get me what I wanted, but I knew it was only because my parents were mega-rich. No one actually cared about *me*. I stopped trusting people, stopped letting them get close. That's why the Balan Theatre appeared to me. That first time we met, in the lobby? You didn't know the first thing about me, but you saw I was scared, and you said you'd have my back if anything happened. I started to trust you. That's why Lance's power held no sway over me.”

“I…I remember that. You were so terrified. I was terrified, too, but I didn't want to let on…”

“Which is why you lost to Lance, despite trying your best.” Balan bent down to peer into Streetbeat-Leo's face. “Does that put all your questions to rest?”

“I still have one. Why didn't I transform like everyone else?”

Balan grinned.

“Remember the walls you built ‘round your heart? Meeting everyone here slowly tore them apart. You may have maintained you were fine on your own, but a desire to protect new friends you've always shown. Starting with that promise you made to Fighter-Emma when she was afraid.”

“I…promised…” In his mind, Streetbeat-Leo saw Clocktower Kid and all the other people he had met.

“It's that very *positive* promise that saved you when Lance's negative power might have enslaved you.”

It wasn't until he heard it put into words that Streetbeat-Leo began to understand why the others had seen something else in their visions besides Fighter and Balan, and he hadn't. The visions had shown them their deepest, darkest fears.

Balan nodded as if he knew what Streetbeat-Leo was thinking.

“You see, you didn't really *want* to be friendless or alone. And the *lack* of something cannot be shown.”

Fighter-Emma said, “Leo… You and me? *We're* the ones who have to destroy everyone's stages.”

“Wait,” spluttered Streetbeat-Leo, “You mean we—we have to *fight* them?”

“What? No!” She gave a vehement shake of her head. “We have to *save* them. We have to break them free of Lance's negative power, and then we have to take him down— all of us, together!”

Streetbeat-Leo hesitated. He still wasn't sure it was the right thing to do.

“Leo,” said Fighter-Emma fiercely, “You're cool letting Clocktower Kid stay like—like *that*—forever?”

That made up his mind.

“No. Let's save everyone and then kick Lance's butt.” The dark light in his eyes sputtered out.

Suddenly, a Negati lurking nearby turned and launched itself at Streetbeat-Leo, but Fighter-Emma kicked it off.

“What did it attack me for!?”

“It could sense you turning against Lance. The drops you see all around Wonderworld are made from people's memories and emotions. The Tims—those fuzzy furball things you were all so worried about—they tend toward the positive ones, but the Negati go for the negative. The Negati aren't going to be friendly to you anymore, so you better watch out for them when you go to everyone's stages.”

“Wait, you aren't coming with me?”

“I can't. I have something else to take care of.”

“What else is there besides saving everyone!?”

Fighter-Emma gave him an enigmatic smile. “You'll see.”

At that, she spun on her heel and vanished.

“That leaves just me and you,” said Balan with a grin. “Let's be off, little one—we've much to do.”

Streetbeat-Leo hesitated. He only knew how to get to Clocktower Kid's stage from his own, but he wasn't sure he was ready to fight her, even if it meant saving her.

For a few moments he stood debating himself, then drew his shoulders back in resolve and started walking. He led them across the street, down the alley, and over the low wall.

“Huh?” He had followed the exact same path Clocktower Kid had shown him, but they were still in his stage. The twists and turns of the labyrinth

stretched out in every direction.

Balan snorted.

“It seems all their stages are locked. The way Clocktower Kid showed you is blocked.”

“Then there's no way to reach them?”

“Where there's a will, little one, there's always a way. And I am Wonderworld's maestro—what I command, it will obey.” Balan lifted his forefinger. “So—to whose stage first shall we go?”

Leo thought for a moment before answering, “Scarecrow's?”

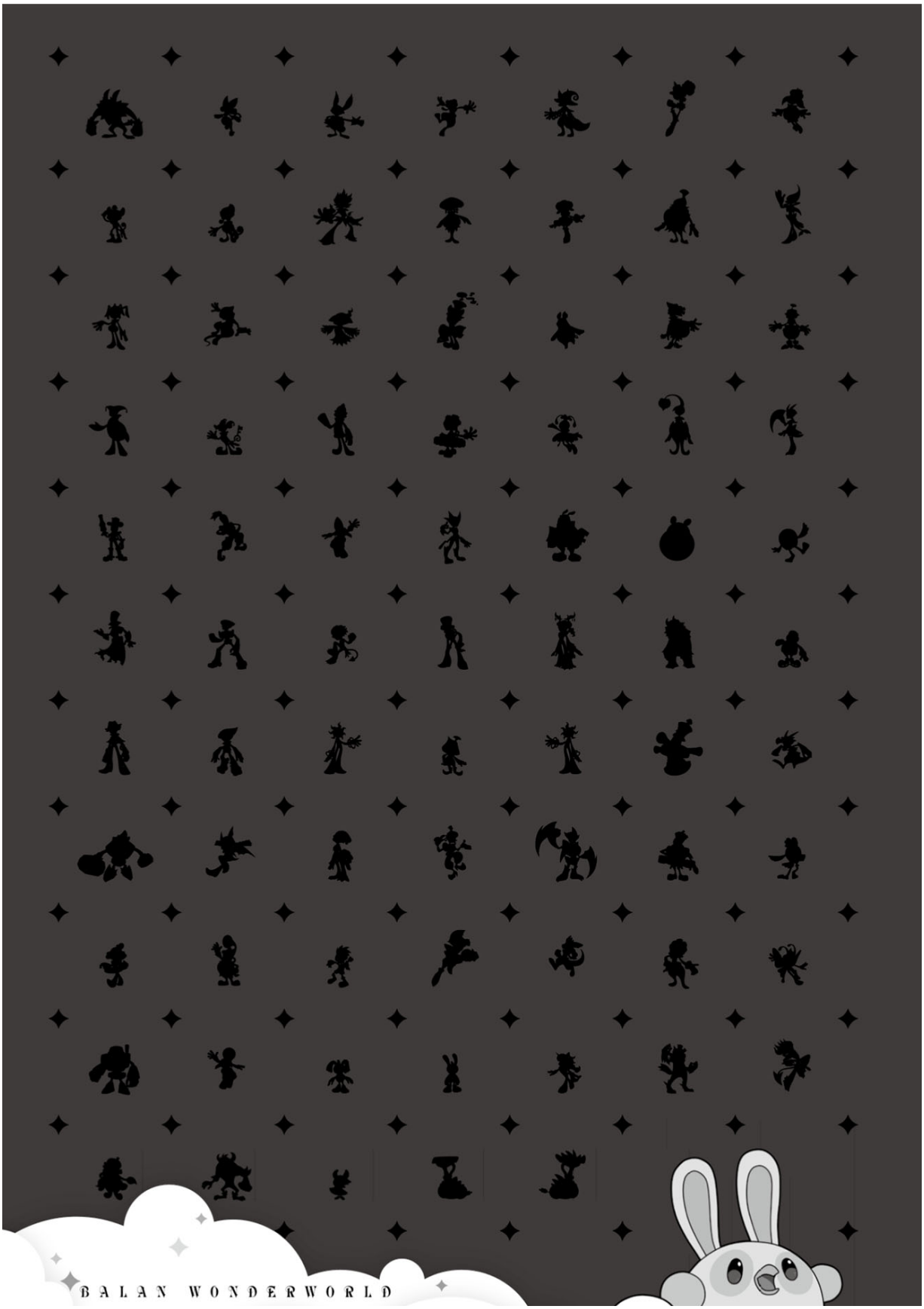
The farmer was so gentle, Leo figured they might be able to explain everything and get him on their side without ever coming to blows.

Plus, his stage was such a gentle place, too…

Balan tilted his head. “He is indeed a very kind man. Let's hope all goes according to plan,” he said, as if he could read Leo's mind.

Balan put a hand on Leo's shoulder and skimmed a finger along the brim of his top hat.

A bright light enveloped them, and Streetbeat-Leo squeezed his eyes shut tight against it.


BALAN WONDERWORLD

III Battle

The One That Used to Be Scarecrow

When Streetbeat-Leo opened his eyes again, he couldn't help but gasp at the strange scenery surrounding him.

“Where are we?”

“Where you told me to go, only a few moments prior—no?”

“This—this is Scarecrow's stage?” said Leo, gulping. “Are you sure?”

Where there ought to have been an expanse of corn fields was instead an endless, towering stone wall.

“Sure as sure can get. He's transformed it for battle, if you want my bet.”

Streetbeat-Leo looked around as Balan spoke. Here and there he caught vestiges of the old stage he remembered.

He was relieved to see that the farmhouse porch, at least, was unchanged.

“What's with the wall?”

Balan put his hands on his hips. “A physical manifestation of his real-world harm, from before he came here to this farm.”

“You think he's trying to protect his stage from the dancing trees he saw in his vision?”

“A good guess, little one, you're quite the sleuth. But you'll have to free Scarecrow from the negativity to get the truth.”

Scarecrow… What are you trying to protect your farm—and yourself—from?

“So how do I free him, then?”

“Remember the lights that flew out of Clocktower Kid when she changed? Those were positive fragments of her heart, the last two that remained. You must find everyone's fragments, somehow, then fire them into the mark Lance left on their brow.”

As Balan spoke, Streetbeat-Leo caught sight of the fuzzy furball creatures bouncing around. Before, they were so translucent he could barely see them, but now they were solid and defined. “What are those things doing here?”

“Those creatures are Tims, but of this you are already aware. They've grown weak due to the negative corruption everywhere. You couldn't see them while Lance held you in his sway, but they never left your side for a single day. And the poor things are starved for drops to eat—you should give them some, as a treat.”

“What'll happen if I do that?”

Balan only gave him an impish grin. “Far be it from me to ruin the surprise. Raise one and see with your own two eyes.”

“I—I think that's Scarecrow!” Leo ran over to the farmer as fast as his feet would go.

But Scarecrow vanished before he could reach him.

Balan groaned.

“He's been taken over by the negativity's blight. Take care, little one, when the time comes to fight.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That wasn't him, I'm afraid. Just an illusion the positivity banished from his heart has made. Though in its weakened state, the light still guides—it can show you where the real Scarecrow hides.”

“Then we have to follow it.”

“There's no point going when we haven't cleared the first roadblock. Scarecrow has shut himself up tight, and there is only one key that opens the lock.” Balan patted Leo's shoulder. “The positive fragments of his heart we need if from Lance's power he is to be freed.”

Leo nodded, then set off toward the stone wall that stood where farmland once sprawled.

On the way they passed a couple of drops, but they were all floating in the air just out of the little Tims' reach. Leo grabbed them and gave them to the furballs when he could, noticing they seemed to perk up and grow a little bigger after eating them. They had been a little spooky when he hadn't been able to see them as anything more than blurry shadows, but now that he got a better look at them, they were kind of cute.

Some of the Tims he fed seemed to take a liking to him and followed him as he walked.

They kept on like this for a while, Leo plucking drops from the air and feeding the Tims bouncing in his wake.

“Look and you'll see there are drops all around. Indeed, even inside that stone one can be found.”

“In here?” Leo touched the one Balan was pointing to. “I'd need a hammer or something to break it open…”

Balan gave an exasperated shake of his head. “You forget we're in Wonderworld, where impossible is only a matter of your imagination's range! Your stage, little one, isn't the only thing you have the power to change.”

Images of Clocktower Kid morphing into a giant monster flashed through Leo's mind.

“You mistake my intent, that isn't at all what I meant.” said Balan, as if he could tell what Leo was thinking from the look on his face. “It isn't your negativity you draw power from now, but *positivity*—and I'll tell you how. Take cleaving open this stone, for a start. Envision yourself strong enough to do it, in your heart.”

“Envision…strength?” said Leo, not quite following.

“Think of positivity like a costume you don whenever you need some additional brawn.”

“A positive costume?”

“Hmmm, this won't do…” Balan tapped a finger to his lips. “It still isn't coming to you? Well then, let me call forth Scarecrow's vision. Perhaps his stage's power will help your cognition.”

Balan reached for Leo, and the moment he touched him, Leo was enveloped in light.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the overpowering luminescence. Once it finally faded, he took a timid peek at his hands.

They were giant! And his fingernails had sprouted into long, sharp claws.

“What did you do to me!?”

Balan winked.

A mirror appeared in front of him, and in it he saw he had been transformed into a wolf.

He was still roughly the same height, but his whole body was covered in fur, and his upper half rippled with powerful new muscle.

“This is the shape of strength in Scarecrow's eyes. See if its name you can surmise.”

Leo stared and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

“Tornado Wolf.”

Leo took in a sharp breath. It was more than just the name that came to him—he knew all the things he was capable of in this form, too.

Leo stood in front of the stone, drew an arm back, and swiped down as hard as he could.

The stone shattered like delicate glass under the blow. Drops spilled out from the rubble.

“Whoa…”

Balan grinned. “And there are more costumes to be found. Ones that let you breathe fire, or fly high above the ground—”

He cut himself off, grabbing Leo's shoulder and jerking his chin toward a Negati.

But the creature must have already spotted them because it was creeping their way.

“What should we do?”

“There's only one thing *to* do: get rid of it before it gets rid of you.”

“You mean…I have to kill it?”

“Negati—and Tims, for that matter—don't die. They just disappear when their power runs dry. And eventually they do reappear, though how long that takes is unclear.”

Leo breathed a sigh of relief to hear that.

Even if the Negati were his enemies now, he had gotten used to seeing the little creatures around Wonderworld. He didn't think he could bring himself to kill one, even in self-defense.

“So how do I make it disappear?”

“Me oh my, asking questions you certainly do adore. Especially all the ones I've answered before.” Balan gave an exasperated snort. “Negati come from the negative piece of a person's heart, born from their fears and doubt. The only way to get rid of a thing like that is to simply stamp it out.”

As Leo puzzled over that, the Negati appeared right in front of him. Without thinking he leapt into the air, stamping down hard on the creature.

The Negati disappeared.

“Yes, just like that—now the time for my advice is done. You'll have to figure out the rest as you go, little one.”

“Wait—you're not going to help me?”

“This is your test, not mine, I'm afraid. To leave Wonderworld, *you* must earn the passing grade. Good luck, little one, I'll be cheering you on to the end. We'll meet again after you've rescued your friend.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Balan vanished.

Leo felt helplessness creep into his heart now that he was on his own. But there was nowhere to go but onward, so onward he went.

Towering walls crisscrossed the stage in winding, befuddling paths. Leo walked through them, smashing any stones that barred his way. He picked up the drops that spilled from the rubble and gave them to the Tims that followed him like Balan had suggested.

With each drop, the Tims grew a little bigger, though Leo didn't notice any other changes taking place. They just stared and stared at him. He supposed that meant they were happy.

He followed the illusion-Scarecrow for a long time. It led him up a tall rise.

At the top of the rise there was a tree, big and beautiful and bright.

Leo saw a light that looked just like the ones that had flown out of Clocktower Kid's body, wrapped in a protective nest of branches.

“It's a Heartree…”

Leo realized he could figure the name of anything in Wonderworld now, as long as he stared at it long enough.

He reached for the glowing tree, but something zapped his hand back. “Ow!”

Pain tingled from the tips of his fingers down to his elbow.

It's protected by negative power…

He looked closer and saw there was some sort of negative force field surrounding the branches.

Drawing upon the strength of his Tornado Wolf costume, he wound a fist back and sent it flying into the branches with all his might. But the blow just bounced off without doing any damage.

To the tree, that is. Leo clutched his arm, moaning in agony. It hurt way worse than before.

The Tims behind him looked from Leo to the Heartree, then seemed to understand what it was he was trying to do. A couple of them began throwing themselves at the tree.

The negative force field disappeared.

Their positive power must have neutralized it…

But the Tims that had struck the tree were as small as they had been before he gave them the drops, maybe even smaller. They must have used up the drops' power in their attack.

“Are you hurt?”

The Tims only gazed at Leo with unreadable eyes.

Maybe this is their way of thanking me for the drops.

He felt a pang of guilt looking at the now tiny Tims.

“Thanks.”

He was getting to like the Tims more and more by the minute.

There were little animals and creatures on all the stages he had been to in Wonderworld, but up until now he hadn't really cared about them one way or another.

Mumbling another quiet thank-you under his breath, Leo took hold of the fragment.

As soon as his fingers closed around it, he knew what Scarecrow had abandoned when he rid himself of this fragment.

He wanted to protect his family…

It was sad to think Scarecrow had discarded such an important part of his heart.

The illusion-Scarecrow was pointing again, somewhere off in the distance.

That's right, Clocktower Kid had two fragments… One down, one to go.

Leo's search wasn't done yet. He went where the illusion lead him.

I still don't know why Scarecrow saw dancing trees in his vision…

If he had to guess, they probably had something to do with the reason Scarecrow went into the Balan Theatre in the first place.

That, and his desire to protect his family.

Leo came to a castle wall.

Peering at it, he saw it was missing something:

Arrowslits.

Castle ramparts always had those little holes in them so the soldiers inside could shoot arrows or guns at the invading enemy, but Leo couldn't see a single opening on this wall.

If those dancing trees were going to attack my stage, I'd want to be able to shoot flaming arrows or something at them. What's he trying to protect his farm from, if not the trees? What happened to him in the real world?

Leo shook his head.

I'll worry about that later.

Streetbeat-Leo pressed onward.

At last, he found the second Heartree.

The Tims seemed to know what he wanted to do. They bounced ahead of him before he could stop them and rammed right into the tree.

The negative force field surrounding it vanished, but the Tims that had rammed it grew smaller and weaker.

I wish there was another way…

Leo rushed to gather nearby drops, feeding them to his Tims. The fuzzballs got a little bigger after eating them.

He let out a sigh of relief, then reached for the fragment.

He didn't let any hardship keep him down…

But then something terrible must have happened that really got to Scarecrow.

Leo shuddered to think what sort of monster Scarecrow's pain might have transformed him into.

After all, when Clocktower Kid discarded her fragments, she turned into a giant cat-beast.

Leo had hoped he might be able to talk things out with Scarecrow, but that was looking less likely now that he understood just how much of himself Scarecrow had thrown away by getting rid of these fragments. Balan was right. This was not going to be easy.

The illusion-Scarecrow lead Leo onward into the stage until they came to a door.

Beyond it, Leo knew he would find the real Scarecrow.

He gripped the doorknob, but it wouldn't budge at all.

Ah—right.

He took out the two fragments of Scarecrow's hearts and touched them to the door.

Slowly, slowly, it opened.

Leo went inside.

In the darkness, he saw a strange light flickering.

What a horrible place to be shut up all alone.

This must be the deepest part of Scarecrow's heart, but nowhere could Leo see even a hint of that beautiful farm of his.

Suddenly, the wind started to howl, and a cyclone raged forward out of the darkness.

It disappeared just as it reached him, revealing a gigantic something he could only describe as a monster.

It looked just like his Tornado Wolf costume.

Leo should not have been surprised. After all, he had borrowed his shape from Scarecrow's imagination. But unlike Leo's costume, this monster emanated strong negative power.

In the few seconds they glared at each other, Leo came to know his enemy's name.

Barktholomew.

So, the changes went deeper than just his appearance…

The monster lunged at him.

“Scarecrow, it's me! It's Leo—I mean, Streetbeat!”

Barktholomew either did not hear or just did not understand. He swiped a giant paw at Leo that would have crushed him to dust if he hadn't leapt out of the way in time.

Guess words aren't going to solve this.

With all his dance training, it wasn't too much of a challenge for Leo to duck and dodge the monster's attacks.

The monster must have realized that he wouldn't be able to land a direct attack on Leo, because he whipped up another cyclone.

How is he doing this!?

Leo bobbed and wove around the cyclone, making sure to avoid it as he tried to get closer to Barktholomew. Lance's mark at last came into his range.

Now!

Leo thrust the two fragments of Scarecrow's heart into the mark.

An ear-splitting scream ripped out of Barktholomew's throat as the negative power started to slough from his body.

Within the writhing darkness stood Scarecrow, his face slack and eyes glazed over.

Leo shouted his name and ran to him, shaking him by the shoulders to try and snap him out of his trance.

Scarecrow's distant gaze dialed in to focus on Leo. He smiled the gentle smile Leo remembered, though it was tinged with sorrow.

“Shucks, Streetbeat. My memory's sort of fuzzy, but…I attacked you, didn't I? I never shoulda let that negative power take hold of me and turn me so hateful. I know it ain't no excuse, but I'm awful sorry.”

Leo shook his head. “It's okay. I know it wasn't really you.”

“I sure owe you big time for rescuing me. Like I said, I don't remember much since the negative power took over, ‘cept how heartsick it made me.”

But Leo noticed the dark light lingering in Scarecrow's eyes. He was not totally free of the negative power's grasp yet.

“Listen. I have to defeat Lance so I can go back to where I came from. Would you help me fight him?”

Scarecrow shook his head.

“I remembered everything from the real world. I worked real hard on the farm so I could give my missus all the nice things she deserved. So I could send our boy to college. Then one night the radio said there was a chance some rain and wind was a-comin'. But it wasn't any old rain and wind that came, but one of the worst twisters I'd ever seen. The dancing trees in my vision? They weren't dancing. They were the trees on my farm, getting tossed around like ragdolls in its wake.”

Leo understood now why Scarecrow had put up stone walls around his farm. They were not meant to keep him out, but to protect the fields from the terrible wind. That was why there were no arrowslits. And that explained why Barktholomew had used a cyclone to attack him at the end. It was the fiercest, scariest power Scarecrow knew.

“That night, our old house moaned and groaned so much, I could've sworn we were going to get blown away. We couldn't take a single step outside for fear of getting tossed around. The next morning, I went outside and saw all the corn torn out at the roots. None of the crop had been spared. My sweet boy tried to comfort me, said he didn't need to go to college, but hearing that only broke what was left of my heart. I remember the shovel falling out of my hands. That's when I saw the Balan Theatre, right in the middle of my mangled fields. Truth is, the corn crop on my stage would never ripen. I reckon that's on account of me being so afraid of a storm coming right

before harvest time. I didn't want to grow something just to watch it all that hard work get destroyed again."

"I get it," said Leo. Now he knew why he had felt so uneasy on his first visit to Scarecrow's stage, when the farmer had told him all he did was sit in his rocking chair and look out at the fields of corn. Corn that the farmer made sure would always stay on the cusp of harvest, eternal potential that would never be lost or ruined.

"I broke my back working that farm, and what do I got to show for it? What am I supposed to do now that it's gone? Ain't nothing for me back in the real world. Might as well stay here on my stage…"

"That isn't true!" insisted Leo. "I know how much you want to protect your family, and how strong you are in the face of hardship. I gave both of those things back to you! Use that power to defeat Lance, so you can go home to the real world, to your family!"

"And do what? Shucks, how can I face them after all this?" The farmer hung his head, covered his face with his hands. "I'm as useless as a scarecrow in an empty field."

Suddenly Leo became aware of Balan's presence beside him.

"For a time, we must leave him be," he sighed. "Banishing the storm alone will not set him free. His despair goes very, very deep. His heart isn't yet strong enough to fight off its creep. But you've done all you can for your friend. The rest is up to him mend."

"Are you sure?" Leo looked at the farmer one last time. He still had his hands over his face, but between his fingers, Leo could see the dark light

that still glittered in his eyes.

“Come, little one, there are others yet to save,” said Balan, glancing to Leo. “Tell me where you want to go next, and the way I shall pave.”

“To…Invisible Custodian's stage.”

“A kindly old chap he may appear at first, but I wouldn't underestimate the dark power his heart may have nursed.”

Balan brushed the brim of his hat, and Scarecrow's farm vanished.

The One That Used to Be Invisible Custodian

The ruins…

The once-solemn temple was now a cacophony of movement, its floors and ceilings turning around like mechanical cogs.

If Leo did not tread carefully, he could very well be crushed beneath one of the rotating stone pillars.

He crept closer to get a better look at the pillars and was surprised to see, not the lovely birds and flowers he feared had been caught in their gnashing gears, but crushed appliances and flattened cans, shredded magazines and crumpled plastic bottles.

These ruins were made of fossilized rubbish?

Some twinge of instinct made him leap back away from the pillar he was inspecting.

While he had been distracted, a giant wall behind him had started closing in. He'd come a hair's breadth away from being flattened like a pancake.

I better not lose focus again.

It didn't take long for him to figure out the way. Invisible Custodian's illusion appeared to guide him.

He followed the illusion through the ruins, dodging around or jumping over the ever-moving walls as he went.

And if the deadly obstacle course wasn't making navigating the stage hard enough, Leo had to deal with endless swarms of Negati, too.

He lost count of the number of times he was nearly crushed by a stone wall while he was distracted fighting the Negati. But whenever he tried to move *with* the stones, he would lose sight of the lurking Negati and then find himself suddenly surrounded.

It was impossible trying to deal with both the Negati and the moving stones at the same time.

Guess I should borrow a costume from Invisible Custodian's imagination…

Leo closed his eyes to concentrate.

“Okay…I think I get it."

When he opened his eyes again, he was wearing the Invisible Man costume. At least, he thought he did—he couldn't even see himself.

Now he could slip past the Negati without them noticing and focus on gathering drops.

He made his way through the stage, slipping quietly past any Negati he came across.

At last, he found both Heartrees.

And with the Tims' help, he claimed the fragments of Invisible Custodian's heart.

First was the piece that loved his town, and second was the part of him that was forgiving.

As he explored, Leo came to understand why Clocktower Kid had said this stage was so like his own: neither he nor Invisible Custodian had made any inhabitants.

Leo hadn't because he believed he didn't need anyone else around. Invisible Custodian hadn't because he had been unable to forgive.

Leo did not know what Invisible Custodian's town in the real world was like, or what the people there might have done to him.

But he did know that if Invisible Custodian had lost his ability to forgive, then it was going to be next to impossible to talk things out.

The two fragments in hand, Leo pressed on to where the real Invisible Custodian lay in wait.

But when he arrived, there was no one there.

Still, Leo knew better than to let his guard down.

He closed his eyes.

For a while, nothing happened.

Leo lunged to the side, just as the stone he had been standing on exploded into bits.

The ruined stone was scorched as if it had been struck by lightning. Leo turned to face it.

“I had a feeling you'd made yourself invisible, too. But that trick won't work on me. I can sense your movements.”

As if enraged by his words, the creature that had been Invisible Custodian finally showed himself.

He looked like a caricature artist had decided to draw a grotesque mash-up of a man and a vacuum cleaner.

His name came to Leo easily: *Hooverton.*

Hooverton was easily ten times as big as Leo. He vanished from view, striking with his lightning attacks over and over. Leo spun and twisted gracefully out of the way, always just in time to avoid being smashed along with the stones.

There!

With his eyes shut tight, Leo could feel where Lance's mark was.

He jumped high into the air, aimed in the mark's direction, and flung both fragments of Invisible Custodian's heart right at it.

Hooverton reappeared with a great shriek.

The monstrous form crumbled open, revealing the original Invisible Custodian within.

He sank to his knees, hanging his head in forlorn shame.

“I never intended to hurt you…”

“I'm fine, see? Don't beat yourself up about it. But what was with the whole vacuum thing?”

“I remember everything. I remember who I really am. The town I'm from had a horrible litter problem. It made me so sad to see my home choking in

refuse, so I would go out and clean it up. But no matter how much garbage I picked up, I'd go back the next day and there'd be a whole new mountain of trash in the place I'd just tidied. Kids would toss their trash on the street right in front of me, even though they knew how hard I worked to try and keep the town clean. I realized I wasn't making any difference. It was like no one even noticed I was there. I started wondering if maybe no one could even see me…"

"So that's why you turned into Hooverton."

"It is. And I remember as soon as I stopped forgiving the people in my town, that's when the Balan Theatre appeared."

As if summoned, Balan suddenly stood beside them.

"You are not the only one, you know, who cleaned up garbage come sun or snow."

Invisible Custodian shook his head. "Perhaps, but there are far more people who litter. And more now than ever before."

Leo kneeled in front of the despondent Invisible Custodian.

"But you never let that stop you picking up trash. That's pretty awesome. Come on. I need someone as awesome as you to help clean up the mess Lance has made of Wonderworld. Then we can go home."

Invisible Custodian shook his head.

"I can't. I'm too tired from fighting a losing battle against litter."

In that moment, he looked even older and frailer to Leo than he ever had.

"So even with your heart repaired, to stand and fight you still are scared." Balan sighed, then set off walking. Leo scrambled to keep up. "Well, no

time to waste. To the next stage we must make haste.”

The One Who Used to Be Bugsy

After what had happened with Scarecrow and Invisible Custodian, Leo was braced for Bugsy's stage to be totally different when he and Balan arrived. Even then, he was still caught off guard by just how much it had changed.

The once sun-dappled woods were now shrouded in midnight darkness. The only light came from some glowing mushrooms, and even that was barely enough to see their surroundings.

The aroma-shrooms were still there. They made Leo remember how cute Clocktower Kid had been when she had shown him why she'd called them that. Without thinking, he leaned over to brush his fingers against one.

It belched a cloud of toxic-looking purple spores that made Leo sputter and gag.

Balan chortled. “Oh dear, it slipped my mind to warn you—touching those aroma-shrooms you really ought not do.”

“You think!?”

“Experience really is the best teacher, you see. You've a lot of lessons yet to learn—but not from me,” said Balan, and disappeared.

“Normally you learn the lessons *before* you get tested on them!” Leo shouted after the man's vanishing form.

Grumbling, Leo turned away to get his bearings. Now that he was getting a better look, he could see spiderwebs everywhere.

But these were not the lovely webs from before that melted like snow under his touch. The strands were as thick and tough as wire, meant to ensnare any invading enemy.

Leo was wondering how he was going to get through them when Bugsy's illusion appeared.

All around her flitted the one insect that had never been on her stage before: butterflies.

I wonder what happened to her in the real world that makes butterflies so significant…

The ones fluttering around the illusion were white, glowy little things that made it impossible to tell what kind they were.

What's the deal?

Bugsy's illusion had a terribly lonely expression on her face that Leo took to mean, in her heart of hearts, she wanted to be rescued.

Then help me help you.

Leo drew on Bugsy's imagination and donned a new costume: Web Wrangler, it was called, and every aspect looked inspired by the eight-legged silk weavers.

He took hold of one of the webs and tested his weight on it. The fat, thick strands held him up no problem.

The wall that Bugsy had created to protect her stage from invaders was now Leo's way inside.

He traveled quickly through the woods, locating the first Heartree.

The Tims slammed into it, using their power to dispel the negative force field encircling the arbor.

“Thanks again,” Leo said to the Tims, taking hold of the fragment of Bugsy's heart.

As soon as he touched it, he knew this was the part of her that loved taking care of little creatures.

That would *be a hobby of hers.*

And it probably wasn't just any little creature, but *butterflies* in particular.

But Bugsy had thrown this part of herself away and was cocooned in negativity.

I gotta get this back to her, ASAP.

Streetbeat-Leo made his way through the stage, fighting Negati every step of the way.

Illusion-Bugsy helped him find the second Heartree, where he rescued the second fragment of her heart: the strong part of her that did not care a single bit about what other people thought of her.

Which means she started caring about what someone *thought… But who?*

He had no idea how this was related to the part of her that loved caring for little creatures, but he figured he would find out when he found her.

He could try asking the illusion-her, but something told him she wouldn't have any answers for him.

It wasn't much longer until he found where the real Bugsy had shut herself away.

I wonder what she transformed into…

Both Scarecrow and Invisible Custodian had become warped by the darkness in their hearts. Leo thought of Clocktower Kid's monstrous metamorphosis and felt a stab of sadness in his chest.

Something made him look up at the sky just as a huge, grotesque monster came swooping down.

It looked like a butterfly, spider, and praying mantis had all been rolled into one, a fearsome creature that was nothing like the timid girl Leo remembered.

I can't believe that's really her!

Her name had changed, too, just like the others. This monster was not Bugsy, but Wormsworth. Leo barely picked his jaw up off the ground in time to avoid her merciless attacks.

Her raptorial forelegs stabbed down at him, but his dance training meant he could spin away from her faster than she could strike. He spun and lunged out of her reach.

Eventually the monster seemed to realize these attacks were not getting her anywhere, so she backed away and sat stock-still.

Thinking Wormsworth could no longer reach him from there, Leo relaxed a bit. He knew who she was at her core under all that monster—a sweet, gentle girl who would never hurt a fly.

But it was a mistake to let his guard down.

He yelped in shock as her sickle-like forearms detached themselves from her body and flew right at him like sharp, spikey boomerangs.

They tore great gashes through his costume.

Should've known better…

Names in Wonderworld, he realized, denoted a person or thing's true nature. The thing he was fighting wasn't the shy, gentle girl he knew.

I can't feel even a flicker of her in there.

Leo inched closer and closer to her as they fought, closing the distance with every move. At last, he saw his chance and shot the fragments of Bugsy's heart into Lance's mark.

Wormsworth's shriek pierced the air. Leo clapped his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them again, he saw Bugsy, returned to her human form. She stood with her back to him.

He made his way over to try and talk to her, but she turned her face away.

“Don't look at me. I can't believe I turned into something so…so awful…”

“That wasn't really you, Bugsy. Don't be ashamed.”

His encouragement did not seem to reach her. She hung her head. “I'm really sorry.”

“Seriously, you don't have to apologize for being manipulated by your negativity. But I was wondering…why'd you go into the Balan Theatre in the first place?”

She was quiet for a few moments, and then continued in a halting voice.

“We were studying butterflies at school, so I brought in some caterpillars that I'd found around my neighborhood. All of my classmates thought they were gross, but they helped me look after them. At first, anyway. A couple

of them stopped helping, until eventually it was just me. It's not like caterpillars are my favorite thing in the whole world, but without me taking care of them, they'd die.”

“That's rough…”

“So, I had no choice but to look after them. There were a bunch of different kinds, but the one that gave me the most trouble was the lantern fritillary. That species lives high up in the mountains and can only eat mugwort, which didn't grow anywhere near where I lived. I had to wake up before dawn and head way out of town to find it. And because I worked so hard to take care of them, my classmates started calling me horrible things like ‘caterpillar nerd’ behind my back. I hated it. I didn't care what happened to the caterpillars anymore. That's when I came across the Balan Theatre.”

That explained why she had gotten rid of the parts of her that loved little creatures and no longer cared what anyone else thought.

“You're incredible,” said Leo.

Bugsy shook her head.

“No, I'm not. I don't want to take care of those dumb caterpillars anymore. I don't want to see my classmates ever again.”

He remembered how there hadn't been any other people on her stage when they'd met. Maybe she couldn't stand the sight of anyone except the friends she had made in Wonderworld.

“The wriggling thing that was coming to eat you,” said Leo, the pieces clicking together in his mind. “That must have been the lantern caterpillar

you'd been taking care of. You must have been so worried about it getting food that you started seeing it in your vision."

He placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Help me take down Lance. Then we can leave Wonderworld, and you can get back to raising your butterflies!"

Bugsy only shook her head.

Then Balan was there beside Leo, sighing.

"She can't help us on our mission, not in this condition."

The One That Used to Be Checkered King

Balan and Streetbeat-Leo arrived on Checkered King's stage in what looked like a marketplace, though the merchants and artisans and frolicking children from before were nowhere in sight.

The road out of the market led up and was warped in strange, looping curves.

Weird…

Leo followed the road with his eyes and saw it led to the castle.

Checkered King's stage had been twisted into some sort of sphere, with Leo and Balan standing on the inside of the curve.

Leo looked down at his feet.

Instead of the grey stones he remembered from his last visit, the roads were covered in alternating squares of white marble and black granite.

“It's like we're on a giant…well, a giant chessboard.”

“Unsurprising, considering your foe's name,” muttered Balan. “Good luck, little one, playing his game.”

And with that, Balan disappeared.

Leo made his way into the castle.

Just like before there was a tournament being held in the garden, but the jousters had transformed into knight chess pieces, and the soldiers had all turned into pawns.

Leo wondered what sort of chess-related incident had happened to Checkered King in the real world to leave such deep scars on his heart.

And what does that golden chalice he saw in his vision have to do with anything?

He knew it wasn't any use to speculate.

“If we're playing chess, then I guess that makes me the opposing king,” Leo shouted at the castle. Then he closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he had donned a costume that looked like the white king chess piece: Quad Cannon.

He knew how to use it at once. All he had to do was focus his will power to summon the cannons around him—one each in front and behind, one each to his left and right—then aim and fire. He tested it out on some Negati that attacked him with great success.

This feels less like the way the king fights, and more like a rook…

He wondered about that as he hopped across the black and white tiles on the road.

Suddenly a white knight piece appeared out of nowhere, lunging right at him.

“Pretty sure it's against the rules for pieces to attack their own king!” shouted Leo to the sky, even knowing it was pointless. This was Checkered King's stage, after all; the only rules here were the ones *he* made.

Inside the castle, Leo found the Heartrees and got the heart fragments out of them, with the Tims' help. The first one he obtained was the part of Checkered King that cherished life, and then the part that was forgiving of himself.

So, what, he doesn't think life is worth it now? And what can't he forgive himself for?

Leo had no idea what these heart fragments meant to Checkered King.

But now that he had found them, the only thing he could do was press onward, heading deeper into the castle where he knew he would find the king waiting.

Leo stopped and looked around. He had come to a giant chessboard the size of a soccer field.

Whatever hurt Checkered King definitely has something to do with chess.

A thunderous roar rose around him as a giant monster appeared, one that was shaped like a chess king. It was Checkered King, or *had* been, anyway. He was now so huge he could barely fit onto the chessboard.

So, you're going by Fortstopher IV *now, huh?*

Fortstopher IV ordered the chess pieces to attack. All of them, white and black both, charged right at Leo.

“That's *definitely* against the rules,” he shouted.

But Checkered King did not care about breaking the rules. His attacks were relentless, and his sharp wit meant he could read Leo's every move.

“Chess might be your thing,” said Leo, spotting a break in the enemy's ranks, “but dance is *mine.*”

And he spun, flinging the heart fragments at the monster.

With a great groan the monster shrank and transformed back into the Checkered King Leo knew.

The king sat with his arms around his legs on the chessboard. Leo walked over and crouched in front of him. “Why chess?”

Checkered King looked deflated as he answered. “I was the world champion.”

“Seriously? That's incredible!”

The king pursed his lips.

“I was something of a prodigy when I was younger. For over a decade, I was the reigning champion. They said I was untouchable. I was the best at chess, and then I found a wonderful wife to marry. Everything was perfect. So perfect, I didn't even realize it at the time.

Then one day this kid of about twenty turned up, and suddenly my hold on the title of champion wasn't as secure as it had been. He was pulling it right out from under me. Maybe my confidence was shaken. Maybe I just wasn't as sharp as I had been. Either way, I couldn't seem to win. My rank kept getting lower and lower until I was playing against *teenagers* who were better than me.

I remember one match against a fourteen-year-old boy. He moved his queen to a position that confused me a great deal, for if she were lost, his king would be left vulnerable. No matter how you looked at the board, it seemed like he was handing me victory on a silver platter. But my intuition was telling me I was going to lose.

I looked at the boy's face and saw he was smiling, ever so faintly. I made my moves, all pretty standard. On the third move, I finally realized what he was playing at, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. I lost, and sank into a deep despair." Checkered King's face scrunched up as if he was in pain. "But I wallowed so much in my own self-pity that I never even noticed the sickness quietly ravaging my wife's body until it was too late. I lost the love of my life because I couldn't see anything beyond my own selfish desire to be the chess champion again.

"I threw everything away. All my chess sets, all my medals and trophies. All of it."

Leo started at the mention of awards. "The golden chalice in your vision. Was that one of the trophies you'd won?"

"I…suppose it must have been. Perhaps throwing them away didn't completely rid me of all sentiment… After I got rid of them, I had nothing. I would wander the streets for hours at a time. That's when the Balan Theatre appeared before me."

Leo reached out a hand to Checkered King, but then the queen appeared, standing between them. She was not shaped like a chess piece, but like the beautiful woman she had been when Leo first came to the stage.

Checkered King was shaking his head. “I know you seek to defeat Lance, but I cannot help you.” He looked at his queen. “My heart may have created her, but she is my wife. I have no intention of relinquishing my stage.”

“That is not your real wife,” said Balan. Leo jumped at his sudden appearance. “She's but a lie you've constructed to ease your strife.”

Balan spoke the harsh truth Leo couldn't bring himself to vocalize.

But Checkered King only hugged his queen tight, pressing his face against her chest.

“She is the only thing I have left. Leave me be.”

Leo may have returned the fragments of his heart, but it seemed like Checkered King had a long way to go before he was truly healed.

Knowing nothing he said now would get through to him, Leo turned his focus to helping the others.

The One That Used to Be Madam of the Mansion

Balan brushed his fingers against the brim of his top hat.

In the time it took for Streetbeat-Leo to blink, Balan had transported them to a strange room.

“I said I wanted to go to Madam of the Mansion's stage next, Balan.”

“Indeed, you did.” Balan spread his hands. “I have done as you bid.”

Leo took another look at their surroundings. If he squinted, he could just make out the resemblance to the grand mansion Madam of the Mansion had

ushered him and the others through the last time he'd been here.

But the lavish console tables with their vases and ornaments were gone, as were the extravagant tapestries and the plush furniture. The only things Leo could see were giant tubes of pigment and all sorts of brushes lying around the place like oversized objets d'art, and a painting on the wall that looked like it was only half-finished.

This can't *be the same mansion…*

The hallways were a jumble of 90- and 180-degree angles, skewed this way and that, while dozens of staircases crissed and crossed, some leading nowhere, others jutting right into the ceiling.

“There's no way out of here.”

“Perhaps not, or maybe so. You might yet discover something useful, you know.” At that, Balan vanished.

Leo looked around.

Something useful, huh?

His roving eyes stopped on a huge mirror.

There hadn't been a single mirror in the mansion the last time he'd been here.

That was when he remembered Clocktower Kid pulling out a little mirror from her pocket, frantically checking her turquoise hair before they went inside.

She knew there weren't any mirrors in the mansion and that she couldn't take out hers around Madam of the Mansion. But why mirrors…?

Leo jerked as he noticed something strange.

The reflection!

He stood in front of the mirror, looking at the backwards reflection of the room.

Slowly, he reached his hand out to touch it. His fingers contacted the glass surface, and then sank into it.

There's a room on the other side!

Leo steeled himself, then stepped all the way through.

The room he stepped into was the flipped and inverted version of the one he had just come from. In the mirror, the staircase that had hung down from the ceiling now ascended from the ground, and the warped hallways now formed a path forward.

Madam of the Mansion's illusion appeared, guiding him through the stage.

But even with her leading the way, the floors and ceilings and hallways and staircases twisted and turned in such a surreal fashion, Leo felt certain he was going to get lost.

After some time making his way through the mansion, Leo finally found a Heartree tucked inside a room that seemed made for hiding things.

The Tims helped him get the heart fragment the same way they always did.

This first piece was Madam of the Mansion's confidence in her appearance.

Is that why there weren't any mirrors before? Because she couldn't stand to look at herself anymore?

After a while, he found the second fragment of Madam of the Mansion's heart: the part that accepted herself just the way she was.

Leo tilted his head, confused.

Up until now, the heart fragments the others had discarded when they'd succumbed to their negativity and turned into monsters had to do with something they'd cherished but had ultimately hurt them.

The Madam of the Mansion that had invited Leo inside her mansion had been bright and bubbly—maybe a little bit *too* much, the way she fussed and spoke without hardly pausing for breath. She had accepted herself just the way she was, and yet in doing so, had hurt herself enough for the Balan Theatre to appear?

You really can't know what's inside a person's heart from what they show you on the surface.

The illusion-Madam of the Mansion was pointing the way again.

He followed her to a ravine that was so deep, he couldn't make out the bottom when he peered over its edge.

But he could sense Madam of the Mansion on the other side. If he wanted to get to her, he would have to find a way across.

Something told him this ravine had been born of the darkness in her heart.

Leo drew on the power of her stage for help.

When he opened his eyes, he saw he was wearing a costume called X-ray Ape. It may have looked like a comical rendition of a tarsier, but it came with some serious power.

Leo could see a handful of bridges floating in what he had taken to be empty space above the ravine. He realized this costume let him see things that were otherwise invisible to his naked eye.

He leapt from bridge to bridge, but then stopped. He sensed a strange presence.

Some sort of goo was dripping onto the bridge in front of him. The wooden planks it plopped onto started to smoke and melt away like slices of cheese over an open flame.

Leo startled back, then glanced up.

What is THAT*!?*

A grotesque monster floated in the air above him.

Inkabelle…

It looked vaguely like an octopus, except it had way more than eight tentacles, each of which gripped a giant paintbrush dripping the bridge-melting goo.

Leo remembered the paints and brushes he'd seen inside the transformed mansion earlier.

Was Madam of the Mansion an artist in the real world?

The monster didn't give him time to ask, though he doubted she would have answered.

She swiped her paintbrushes at him, filling the air with a downpour of goo.

Leo dodged back out the way, keeping his eyes fixed on the monster. At this rate, there weren't going to be any bridges left to stand on.

The monster slowly advanced on him, seeming to realize she wasn't getting anywhere trying to paint him out of existence.

Right where I want you.

From that height, Leo figured he could get in an attack or two of his own.

But it was not that easy. The bridge planks were starting to fade, no matter how hard Leo stared at them. X-ray Ape's power wasn't going to keep them visible for much longer.

He only had the ability to see through things because he'd borrowed it from Madam of the Mansion's stage. He would have turned to flee, but it was too late.

The bridges disappeared.

Leo couldn't tell where was safe to step and where was simply air.

He couldn't move. He was trapped in place under a merciless deluge of goo.

But then he realized he didn't need to see the bridges themselves. They might have been invisible to him now, but he could still see the signs of the goo sizzling them away. Where there was smoke, there must be planks.

So much for painting me into a corner, Madam of the Mansion.

Grinning, Leo leapt from bridge to bridge, trying to locate Lance's mark on Inkabelle.

He found it just as she swiped one of her paintbrushes at him and hurled the fragments right at it.

Inkabelle gave a shriek of anguish as she started to shrink, until nothing was left of her but Madam of the Mansion.

She was back to normal, but she glared at Leo accusingly.

“Why are you trying to destroy my stage?” she asked in a tearful voice.

“Because…because this isn't where we belong. This isn't our home. It's not real—”

“*Real*? What does that even mean?” She was shaking all over. “Painting was my life's passion, so it was only natural I became an artist. Then someone had to go and award me some big, fancy prize!”

Leo was confused. “Isn't that normally a good thing?”

“There was nothing good about it! After that, everyone started judging the value of everything I painted. I couldn't put colors on a palette without worrying about how the finished product would be received. The only things I could paint were copies of pieces I knew were already popular, and then copies of those copies, until one day I realized I had no idea what I really wanted to—what I really *needed* to paint.

“But everyone was waiting for my next masterpiece. I forced myself to work on it. I pushed myself to hard, and in the end took a big brush and painted over the entire canvas in black. I'd painted *thirteen* canvases in nothing but black when the Balan Theatre appeared. This place was supposed to be my refuge from the agony of painting!” Madam of the Mansion was sobbing. “Tell me, if you're so smart—what is *real*!?”

Leo didn't have an answer.

He was casting around for a response when Balan appeared.

“All those fancy things have vanished, and only mirrors remain. Mirrors that weren't here before, for they brought you so much pain. What could that be but a symbol of the love for yourself you feel? Deep down inside you still want to paint—isn't that feeling real?”

Emboldened by Balan's words, Leo took Madam of the Mansion's hands in his.

“Help me fight Lance, and then you can go back home and paint what *you* want to paint.”

Madam of the Mansion shoved Leo away from her.

“I'm not going anywhere! This stage—*this* is my home!” she wailed through her tears.

There was nothing else he could say to her.

The One That Used to Be Seagazer

Streetbeat-Leo stood in a carpet of bindweed, where Seagazer had sat and stared out at the ocean. This had been a beach, the last time he'd been here. He remembered playing with Clocktower Kid and the others in the waves. But now the water had receded so much he could barely see it, and in front of him towered a giant stone structure.

An aquatic shrine?

“Did she build that to protect her stage?”

Balan shook his head. “No, little one, that's been there from the start. Just like Skygazer and Cetacean Island, Seagazer asked Lance for this part.”

“But she never even went into the water.”

“In that respect, she and Skygazer really are two of a kind. They each wanted somewhere they couldn't reach designed. But while Lance may have created this shrine by the shore, remember this stage is *hers*, at its core.”

Balan vanished, leaving Leo alone to puzzle over those enigmatic words.

He set off across the dry seabed.

Up close, the aquatic shrine was beautiful. It was covered in colorful coral and oddly shaped shellfish. But the walls around it were so tall, Leo couldn't see a way inside.

Now what?

He wandered around the perimeter and discovered a couple pillars made of water. Atop one of those, Seagazer's illusion stood beckoning.

You want me to swim inside them?

Leo shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was wearing a finned costume.

What am I now—some sort of fish?

He flapped his tail fin back and forth.

No…not a fish.

The name of the costume came to him: Dynamic Dolphin.

Right then. Here goes…

Timidly, Leo eased himself into the water pillar.

It was hard going at first, figuring out how to use his tail fin to move around, but once he got the hang of it, he sped through the water with joyful ease.

Should be a piece of cake swimming up over the shrine walls now!

Columns of water were no protection against anyone who could swim.

But Seagazer would have thought otherwise. This would have been an impenetrable obstacle for her…

If she'd ever even wanted to try to get in. Seagazer had only ever stared at the ocean.

That's when it hit him.

It's because of dolphins that she doesn't swim. That terrifying sea creature that was trying to kill her in her visions—it must have been a dolphin.

But that realization alone didn't tell him her whole story.

I'll find out more when I find the fragments of her heart.

Whether Seagazer had thought the walls and water pillars would be enough to keep Leo out, or whether she was just so kind—even when consumed by negativity—that she didn't want to hurt anyone, he didn't know. Either way, there were hardly any traps or dangerous obstacles that posed serious risk of harm.

But there *were* still plenty of Negati, and lots of new types Leo had never seen before. He kept his guard up, fending off attack after attack as he made his way through the shrine looking for the Heartrees.

When he found them, the Tims rammed through the negative barriers so he could get the fragments.

The first one he found was the part of Seagazer that loved the ocean.

Weird that someone named "Seagazer" would get rid of the love for the thing she spends all her time looking at… What must have happened to her in the real world?

Leo kept going. He came to a garden where some ocean left behind from the recently receded tide spilled over the shrine walls into a pond.

Behind the waterfall he discovered a hidden passage that led to the second Heartree.

This fragment was Seagazer's tenaciousness in the face of failure.

So, she must have messed up somehow, with something to do with dolphins. Messed up bad enough that she couldn't swim anymore, that she couldn't even stand the ocean she used to love.

I wonder what sort of monster she turned into.

Judging from the other monsters he'd faced, Leo figured there was a good chance she'd turned into the thing that terrified her most.

He kept going until he came to the heart of the shrine. There he found Seagazer, who wasn't Seagazer anymore, but Anjellica.

She was the most atrocious-looking dolphin Leo had ever seen, gnashing a maw full of jumbled teeth at him in challenge.

How can that—that thing *be Seagazer*?

That thing dove right at him. Leo dodged her attack, and as they fought, he began to realize something. All the other monsters he'd fought had disgusted him, but he felt more than that, facing Anjellica. He felt… fascinated by her. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he had felt that about the others, too, but just hadn't noticed at the time.

“Seagazer,” he shouted, even knowing it was useless, “It's me! Streetbeat!”

Unsurprisingly, Anjellica responded with another attack, spewing forth a school of electric jellyfish.

So, you were scared of these too, huh?

Making sure to keep his distance from the shocking jellies, Leo worked his way closer to the monster. The instant he caught sight of Lance's mark, he shoved Seagazer's heart fragments into it.

Anjellica's face contorted in agony as she shrunk and transformed back into Seagazer.

Leo splashed closer, then stopped, glancing down. There was seawater up to his ankles.

“The tide's coming back in! We have to get to the beach!”

He grabbed Seagazer by the hand, and together they fled the aquatic shrine, the waves chasing close behind.

They made it back to the bindweed-blanketed beach just in time. Panting, Leo turned to look at the shrine over his shoulder, but it was already gone. Submerged by the ocean, once again.

Seagazer took a few unsteady steps through the bindweed before collapsing and bringing her knees to her chest.

She had no sooner crouched down than Balan appeared beside her.

“Your memories are back, aren't they? Though I know you'd rather have kept them at bay.”

She nodded.

“I was a professional diver in the real world, training to be an instructor. I loved the ocean so much. I would have spent all my time swimming if I could, playing with the dolphins.

“They were terribly curious, the dolphins. One day they swam over and snuggled right up next to me. It was so adorable…

“But one of the dolphins got hold of my regulator, yanked it right out of my mouth. I panicked and accidentally took in a bit of seawater. Gagging on that, more of the ocean entered my lungs.

“I couldn't get my regulator back in my mouth, and I couldn't get my weight belt off. The more I struggled, the faster I sank to the ocean floor.

“Next thing I knew, I was in a hospital bed. One of my diver colleagues had saved me. My head felt like someone had taken a jackhammer to it and then steamrolled over the pieces, I'd gone so long without air. But worse than that was that I was terrified of going into the ocean again. All because those adorable dolphins had nearly drowned me, just trying to play.

“I couldn't go into the ocean again after that. I hated it. I hated the dolphins. I was so angry all I could do was sit at the beach and look at the water. Then one day I went to the beach, and the Balan Theatre was there.”

Leo put a hand on Seagazer's shoulder. “But part of you still loves the ocean. Come on—help me fight Lance. Once we defeat him, you can get back to swimming.”

“Are you kidding!?” Seagazer shook her head violently. “I have no love for the ocean or for the dolphins anymore. I don't *ever* want to go back to that world! It nearly killed me!”

The dark light glittered stubbornly in her eyes.

“You may believe those lies, but I think your heart desires otherwise.” Balan leaned close, peering into her face. “For proof, to your beautiful stage you need only look. The real world and its oceans you never totally forsook.”

“I'm sorry,” said Seagazer in a small voice. “But promise me you'll save Skygazer. I can't bear the thought of him trapped as a monster in that awful darkness…”

“I promise,” Streetbeat-Leo said, and turned to walk off down the beach without another word.

“Why, little one—you seem quite upset,” said Balan, glancing sidelong at Leo as they walked. “Is your inability to convince the others to help you fight Lance making you fret?”

“No.”

“It's hard to believe that when you wear such a frown. Tell me, what is it that's got you so down?”

“It's just… Everyone's been hurt so badly. It makes me wonder if they'll ever be happy, even once they leave Wonderworld.”

Balan snorted. “Happiness isn't weather—it can't be forecast. Not by you, nor by me, nor by anyone asked.”

“Then what's the point of making us pass a test before we can leave Wonderworld?”

“The test restores *balance*, nothing more, nothing less. Your happiness is up to *you* once you leave, a problem you yourself must address. Don't tell me you're getting cold feet, little one. Not now, when your task is so close to done!”

Balan looked at him long and hard, and Leo saw himself reflected in that appraising gaze.

“No way am I giving up, not when I know how much everyone suffers when they're trapped by the negativity. I have to fight to free them from that. Besides, I promised Seagazer.”

Grinning, Balan reached up to brush the brim of his top hat.

“Doubting you was my mistake, one I shan't a second time make.”

The One That Used to Be Skygazer

Just like the others, Skygazer's stage had been completely transformed.

It should have been an endless hill overlooking the sea, freckled with windmills every color of the rainbow.

But now it was blanketed in strange machines Leo had never seen. Pipes and gears and oddly shaped implements lay strewn about. The windmills were still there, their rotors still turning, but they were completely rusted over.

The hill had been torn out of the earth and now floated high in the air. Leo wasn't going to get anywhere walking—he'd have to fly.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he found himself clad in a winged costume.

Aero Acrobat… I should be able to fly no problem now!

Leo flapped his wings, rising into the air towards the hill.

It was awkward going at first. He kept dipping and swerving through the air, threatening to fall to the earth, but eventually he got the trick of it and

leveled out. Like with dancing, flying was all a matter of how he balanced himself.

He sped toward the top of the hill as fast as his wings would take him.

Uh-oh…

He yelped as a sudden wind sent him tumbling off course. Once he had righted himself, he looked in the direction the gust had come from and saw a windmill—or at last, what he *thought* was a windmill.

That's no windmill—that's a propeller! That's what's making this wind!

He noticed then that Skygazer's illusion was standing atop the hill, hand raised to point at something in the distance.

Leo followed his finger to an island, hovering high in the sky.

Is that Cetacean Island?

Lance's creation glided through the sky, almost like it had a destination in mind.

Leo flew toward it, leveraging the gusts whipped up by the propellers.

On the island he was unsurprised to find a Heartree.

There were Tims there, too. Like the Negati, they seemed to be able to go wherever in Wonderworld they pleased.

It was almost like they'd been waiting for Leo, because the moment he arrived they busted through the barrier around the tree.

And I haven't even had a chance to feed you drops…

He felt a little guilty as he reached for the first fragment of Skygazer's heart. This one was his love of the sky. The second fragment was his

tenaciousness in the face of failure. Pretty much identical to the fragments that Seagazer had discarded from her heart.

Does this mean they went through the same kind of horrible thing in the real world? Then, Skygazer…what happened to you?

Leo shook his head to clear his thoughts.

No use wondering. I have to bring him back to himself.

After all, he had made a promise.

Leo headed into the Cetacean of the Skies.

Inside was far larger than he would have expected, looking at it from the outside.

There he found Skygazer, or the monster that had been him. He was huge, with metal wings and propellers that made him look like a living, breathing aircraft. And his name wasn't Skygazer anymore, but…Worville Wright.

So whatever bad thing happened to him in the real world must've had to do with planes.

“Skygazer! Seagazer's back to normal! And she asked me to get you back to normal, too!”

Worville Wright did not seem to register what Leo was saying at all. He flung propeller after propeller at him. Their blades were razor sharp, and sliced what they hit clean in two.

Leo, as light on his wings as he was on his feet, dodged everything Worville Wright threw at him.

Enraged, the monster began hurling even bigger propellers through the air.

Leo wove between them, getting closer to the monster each time he dodged. Then, as Worville Wright drew back another propeller to throw, Leo seized his chance and thrust the heart fragments into Lance's mark.

Worville Wright went into a tailspin, crashing into the earth with a terrible crunch.

In the wreckage crouched Skygazer, unmoving.

“Are you okay?”

After a moment Skygazer finally lifted his head. “I should be asking *you*. Letting the negativity control me, attacking you like that—”

“Don't beat yourself up about it. Seriously.”

“I'll try not to. But—Seagazer. Is Seagazer all right?”

“I tried to tell you before, but I guess there really is no reaching people through the negativity. She's fine. I helped her turn back to normal.”

Skygazer released a long sigh of relief. “Do me a favor and spare me the details of the kind of monster she turned into, all right? And…don't tell her what I turned into.”

“I won't, don't worry. But what *happened* to you, in the real world?”

Skygazer sighed again.

“I'd dreamed of flying ever since I was a kid. In elementary school, I modded my bike into my first ever manpowered aircraft, or tried to, anyway. I never got it an inch off the ground. But I didn't give up. I turned the shed outside our house into my workshop and kept tinkering away, improving the design bit by bit.”

That explained all the gears and apparatuses on Skygazer's stage. They must have been inspired from his vision. But why had they been rusted?

“So, then what happened?”

“In middle school, I took it for a test flight down a hill. And it flew, for the first time—well, by ‘flew,’ I mean I got about a foot off the ground. But I lost my balance and crashed, and got hurt pretty bad. My parents grounded me for an eternity after that, but my dreams of flying were still intact. I wanted to do what everyone said was impossible: fly across the Atilla Strait on a manpowered craft.

“I tried crossing my hometown river first, but I didn't even come close to making it. They had to carry me away from that crash on a stretcher, my bones were broken so bad. The doctor told me if it had been any worse, I would've been paralyzed for the rest of my life. Hearing that…terrified me. I haven't so much as touched my flying machine since. I locked up my workshop. All the gear I scraped my allowance together for is in there, rusting away. The cogs and drills I saw in my vision behind Balan…those were some of the tools I used to work on my machine.”

“That's why you lost your love of the sky, and fearlessness in the face of failure…”

“I never was able to fly, in the end. I felt utterly useless. That's when the Balan Theatre appeared.”

Skygazer titled his head back, staring up with a vacant expression on his face.

“But after all that you still wouldn't let go of your dream to fly across the ocean. That's why you had Lance make you Cetacean Island, isn't it? Why you had him make it out of your reach—to give yourself that goal of getting there, one day.”

“I…dunno. I guess it could've been subconscious.”

“You've got the fearless part of you back now, Skygazer. Help me fight Lance!”

Skygazer hung his head. “What did Seagazer say?”

“She said…she said she hated the ocean.”

Skygazer let out a soft, bitter laugh. “Just like I hate the sky. I don't care about flying anymore, Streetbeat. I'm fine looking up at it from down here.”

So, he's out, too…

Leo's shoulders sagged.

“Another dead end?” Leo spun around and saw Balan shaking his head sadly. “Rotten luck, my friend.”

The One That Used to Be Sentinel of the City

Streetbeat-Leo felt his jaw drop when they arrived at Sentinel's stage.

The once-peaceful city was in flames, and crimson lava flooded the streets. Leo saw Sentinel's illusion, standing atop a boulder surrounded by the stuff. He was dressed in a firefighter's uniform.

Was that his job back in the real world?

“Oh my, oh dear,” sighed Balan. “He's lost himself to fear.”

“Yeah, well, so did the others. Sentinel's deepest fear is fire, so makes sense that's what he'd use to protect his stage and try and stop me.”

“The stronger the fear, the stronger the negative power in turn. You still want to risk feeling his burn?”

“I'll just have to think like a firefighter and use their tools of the trade.”

Leo donned a costume modelled after a fire hydrant: Water Blaster.

“Ah, very clever. Then I shall leave you to your endeavor.” At that, Balan disappeared.

Leo used the costume's endless supply of water to cool off the lava blocking the streets and made his way through the stage.

But even so, he still sweltered in the heat of the blaze.

It was so hot, the sweat he flicked from his brow evaporated in seconds.

It was getting harder and harder to go on. He came to a stop in front of a particularly huge bonfire, thinking this was as far as he could go.

But seeing the way the Tims followed, all bunched together to protect one another from the flames, gave Leo the push he needed to keep going. He took one step, and then another, and another.

In the flames he found the first Heartree, where he recovered the part of Sentinel that found purpose in protecting his town. The next fragment was Sentinel's faith in himself.

What kind of firefighter just abandons his duty? A sentinel can't protect anything if he isn't at his post.

It made Leo want to cry, though he knew what he was feeling probably paled in comparison to what Sentinel himself felt. No wonder the man lost faith in himself…

Leo forged ahead to where Sentinel lurked, waiting.

Sentinel—or rather, the Hydrac, as he was now called—looked just like his new name implied. But instead of water, red-hot magma spouted from his maw, burning what little there was left of the town to a charred crisp.

You're supposed to guard *this city, not burn it down! That's the exact* opposite *of a firefighter!*

The dragon spewed lava and flames everywhere. Leo hosed them down as best he could as he closed in on the monster.

But the closer he moved toward the Hydrac, the more unbearably hot it got, until even his costume started to smoke and sizzle.

Just when he thought he couldn't take anymore, he spotted Lance's negative mark. He wound his arm back and hurled the fragments of Sentinel's heart at it as hard as he could.

In slow-motion, the Hydrac crumbled. The flames ravaging the town sputtered out.

Leo found Sentinel in the ruins, looking just as rough as he had when they'd first met.

“Not feeling the firefighter uniform anymore?”

Sentinel hung his head in shame. “I don't deserve to wear it.”

“How do you figure?”

For a long moment, he did not answer. Then, haltingly, he started to speak.

“I loved being a firefighter. Every time there was a call, I'd be the first one changed and in the truck. I cracked jokes with everyone else on the ride over, saying things like, ‘Not every day we get to be a hero—oh wait, we do!’ And then everyone would laugh and we'd all bump fists. We didn't think there was a fire we couldn't put out.”

“But?”

“But then there was a fire at an abandoned factory across the street from some houses. There wasn't any saving the factory, but we weren't about to let the flames spread to those people's homes. Our captain had us spread out in front of the factory with our hoses, standard procedure. We weren't worried. We knew we were gonna be heroes again today, just like every other day.” Sentinel dropped his gaze. “We were wrong, though. Something inside the factory exploded, some chemicals or gas or something left from when it was still in operation. It turned the place into an inferno. The heat was strong enough to burn us even through our uniforms. Then I realized that everyone else had gotten a lot closer to the blaze. No—that's not right. They weren't closer. I hadn't realized it, but the force of the fire—and my own fear—caused me to stumble away, ignoring my orders.”

“Then what happened?”

“The captain came on the radio and told us to back off. I yelled, ‘Get back!’ to everyone else, but they stayed where they were. The flames kept coming toward them. I was terrified. I retreated backwards, angling my hose at the fire as I went. We managed to put it out before it got to any of the houses, but I couldn't look any of the others in the face on the way back to the station. None of them had run away in fear like I had. Soon as we were back, I changed and went straight home. The fire made the papers the next morning. There was a photo of my colleagues on the front page, under a headline calling them heroes. I was so glad it was my day off, so I didn't have to go into the station and face them, and have to explain why I'd retreated so far without any orders.”

“The person you saw in your vision—the one that looked like you? That was one of your squad, wasn't it?”

“Must've been, yeah… I spent the night after the factory incident wandering around town. I remember, soon as I decided to quit the force, the Balan Theatre showed up.” Sentinel's shoulder sagged. “I'm not a hero. I never was. I've only ever been a coward.”

It made sense now, why Sentinel had gotten rid of the parts of himself he had.

Leo placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Help me fight Lance. You can still be a hero. You can still protect your town!”

Sentinel only shook his head. “I told you, I'm nothing but a coward.”

“Then you're fine letting Watcher be a monster forever?”

That seemed to strike a nerve. Sentinel started shaking all over.

But then he stilled and hung his head again. “Cowards can't face monsters.”

“If you need me, I'll be fighting Lance.” Leo turned away.

He wasn't at all surprised to find Balan waiting for him, arms crossed, grinning the same grin as always.

The One That Used to Be Watcher of the Woods

Watcher's stage had barely changed at all.

The giant trees and the cozy little treehouses were all still there.

Leo figured Watcher must have been loath to change her stage, even to better protect it against an invading enemy.

The only difference was the light, or lack thereof. It was pitch black beneath the foliage, no more sun dappling through the leaves.

And the place was crawling with Negati. They seemed to be piqued by Streetbeat-Leo's presence.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was wearing a costume called Guardian Bird.

I knew *birds were a sore spot for Watcher!*

Leo flapped his wings, whipping up a biting wind that blew all the Negati in its path away.

Sweet.

Watcher's illusion guided Leo through the stage. As he went, he rebuffed the flocks of Negati that attacked him with powerful flaps of his wings.

At last, he found the Heartrees. First, he recovered the part of Watcher that found purpose in protecting the woods, and then the part of her that trusted others.

Their names were not the only things Watcher of the Woods and Sentinel of the City had in common—their heart fragments were nearly identical, too.

Since Sentinel had been a firefighter in the real world, Leo guessed that meant Watcher had been some sort of forest ranger or something.

But where Sentinel had lost his faith in himself, Watcher had lost her faith in humanity.

Including, no doubt, Leo.

So that meant he wasn't going to solve this by talking sense into her. He didn't want to fight her, but he wouldn't run away from battle when it came down to it.

And it would come down to it, once he had traveled deep enough into the woods.

Leo looked around. Somehow, he had wandered into a giant bird nest without realizing it.

He had no sooner set foot into the nest when the monster that had been Watcher swooped down to attack. But her name wasn't Watcher anymore—it was Cuckoo. She was a hideous giant, covered in garish feathers. Her attacks were unrestrained and erratic. While unsightly, she was also fascinating.

She had the same power as Leo. No—she was *more* powerful than him, by a longshot. Each flap of her wings birthed a tornado that spun right at him.

Will you quit it! I'm trying to help *you!*

He knew she wouldn't believe him if he said that out loud, so he didn't. She was not going to let him. As agile and graceful as Leo was, dodging so many tornadoes one after the other was taking its toll. And he was not getting any closer to her, since she was flying so high up.

I gotta watch carefully…

Dodging tornadoes left and right, Leo studied her every maneuver.

She couldn't sustain flying forever. She was too big—she'd have to come back down eventually.

Now!

Leo dashed over the moment Cuckoo came down, thrusting the fragments of her heart into Lance's mark.

She let out a squawk of pain, writhing in agony as her body shrank and transformed back into Watcher.

But unlike when he had returned the others to themselves, she regarded Leo with cold suspicion.

Leo may have returned the part of her that trusted others, but he supposed those wounds on her heart hadn't completely healed yet.

“You liked birds a lot, didn't you?”

Watcher gave a curt nod.

“I did. I was getting my master's in ornithology. My thesis was on the lazulibird, a large species of migratory stork with stunning blue wing tips.

There's only a few hundred of them left.

“There was a mammoth of a tree in the woods near where I lived, and a mated pair of lazulibirds had built their roost at its top. It was far too high up to see from the ground, but I guessed there had to be at least two or three eggs in the nest. Lazulibirds are doting parents. One would stay in the nest to warm the clutch under its body, while the other would bring back as much food as it could. In the fall, once their hatchlings were ready to fly, the whole family would head south for the winter.

“I went to the woods to do my research. I imagined catching sight of one of the hatchlings flying around exploring outside its nest and felt my face beaming in a smile. But that smile crumbled away when I heard the tell-tale sound of machinery. I got worried and ran in the direction of the sound and found men with chainsaws at the trunk of the lazulibirds' tree.”

Leo felt his breath catch in his throat.

“What? Why?”

“They were cutting down all the trees in the area to clear land for houses. There was construction equipment everywhere I looked. They'd already carved their way through a huge chunk of the woods.”

“Then that giant, terrible beast you saw in your vision—it must have been a bulldozer or a digger or something.”

Watcher nodded.

“I shouted at the top of my lungs, ‘You can't cut that tree down! The lazulibirds’ nest is up there!' But they told me they'd already gotten the permit from the mayor. They never even turned their chainsaws off. I made a grab for one, but the guy shoved me off. I kept trying to stop them, getting more and more desperate, more and more violent, but they just grabbed me and dragged me out of the construction site. I fought tooth and nail to get back to the tree, but they never let me get past them again.”

Watcher fell silent for a long moment. Then Balan appeared beside them.

“That's not the end—is it, my friend?”

Watcher glared at him.

“Later that night, I snuck out to where the nest was. The monsters had cut the giant tree down, and I found the nest where it had fallen to the earth, the eggs smashed beyond saving. The lazulibirds stood over the remains of their home, looking shellshocked. I started crying. I told them over and over I was sorry I couldn't protect them. I went back to the construction site every night after that. Even though they'd cleared away the giant tree and most of the woods around it, even though there wasn't anything for them to eat, the lazulibirds lingered. Those birds… There's nothing more precious to them than their offspring. If a chick dies in the nest, the parents never leave again. That's one of the reasons lazulibirds are going extinct. But winter was coming, and I begged them to fly south. I told them they could come back in the spring and try and find somewhere safer to build another nest, to raise another brood. The poor things wouldn't budge, no matter how much I tried to get them to go. I found their bodies in the snow, where the giant tree

had once stood.” A muscle in Watcher's jaw tightened. “Humans are so cruel, so unbelievably selfish and greedy. I hate them. They'll destroy anything in the name of ‘development.' You couldn't pay me to live in one of those big houses. Not when they're built on the bones of the lazulibirds, and who knows how many other poor creatures.”

Watcher clenched her teeth. Balan breathed a sigh.

“Humans are everything you accuse. Between them and the sweet lazulibird, I know which I'd choose.”

“But there aren't any lazulibirds on your stage,” said Leo. “They're in the real world. If you don't go back, you won't be able to help any of them.”

No matter how much he tried to reason with Watcher, the dark light in her eyes refused to be extinguished.

He gave up on trying to convince her to leave.

“Well, one thing is undeniable,” drawled Balan. “Your team isn't exactly reliable.”

“Gee, thanks, Captain Obvious.” Leo turned his back on him and strode away.

“Only three more left, three more chances. At this rate, victory may as well be Lance's.”

“Do you ever *shut up*!?” he shouted. He hadn't really meant to.

Balan only shrugged.

The One That Used to Be Pensive Pierrot

At first glance, it did not seem like Pensive Pierrot's amusement park had changed all that much. But it was the black of night now, whereas it had been a bright afternoon on Leo's last visit. Neon signs lit up the whole park. It was surprisingly beautiful, in an ethereal way.

“Oh, little one, don't let appearances deceive,” said Balan with a snort. “This place is a maze—not everything you see you should believe.”

“I'm not stupid,” snapped Leo peevishly.

The families and couples he had seen strolling around earlier were gone, leaving crowds of Negati in their place. The music playing was no longer that cheerful march, but a creepy variation of the melody. This wasn't the stage of the kind clown that had warmly greeted Streetbeat-Leo and Clocktower Kid so long ago. Leo figured it didn't much resemble the amusement park where Pensive Pierrot had worked in the real world, either. And it was probably riddled with traps. He had to tread carefully.

Looking around, he noticed all sorts of attractions floating in the air, connected by nothing but roller coaster tracks.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” said Leo before Balan could open his mouth to speak, and donned a wheeled costume called Rail Runner. “Getting around shouldn't be a problem now.”

He hopped up on the tracks, leaving Balan behind him. He passed the merry-go-round and the teacups, heading for the Ferris wheel he had ridden with Clocktower Kid and Pensive Pierrot.

It really hadn't been that long ago, but it felt like decades had passed. There came a sharp aching in his chest when he thought about the day the three of them had spent together.

But the rides were not meant for Leo's amusement anymore. They were nightmarish obstacles meant to stop him.

Pensive Pierrot probably never imagined his attractions trying to hurt people when he first created them. He'd only ever wanted people to have fun.

It hurt Leo thinking of how the clown's intentions had been corrupted.

He fought Negati as he explored the maze of the park and located the heart fragments. The first was the part of Pensive Pierrot that had the courage to bare his heart, and the second was his courage to accept others' feelings. Finding the fragments gave Leo new insight into the clown.

He was in love with the princess of the parade, but he didn't have the nerve to tell her.

I know you can do it, thought Leo, gritting his teeth.

He knew he was going to have to fight Pensive Pierrot, but he hated the thought. After all, the kind clown had been one of his very first friends in Wonderworld. Him, and Clocktower Kid.

The shock made Leo stop. He had just thought of them as *friends.*

He'd never thought of anyone as his *friend* before.

He'd never thought he *needed* friends. He was fine being a loner.

He felt his eyes go wide with the realization.

That's exactly why I have to fight him. Because he's my friend, and I have to help him!

Leo pressed on through the amusement park, heading for where the merry-go-round used to be. But all the horses and carriages were gone, leaving behind an empty platform, slowly rotating.

Leo felt a cold chill run up and down his spine.

“I know you're there, Pensive!”

As if summoned by his shout, a monster appeared in the middle of the platform.

A horrible heroine for the horrible parade in this horrible park: Princess Marey.

“Seriously?” said Leo. “You lose your nerve and suddenly *she's* the villain in all this? I thought you loved her!”

But he knew it was a waste of time to argue with Pensive Pierrot. The clown was too far gone for Leo's words to reach him.

Princess Marey flounced this way and that, trying to squash him underfoot.

“Think you're a better dancer than me, huh?”

Leo dodged her every sashay with practiced ease.

“You don't have the *nerve* to beat me,” he called, his taunt tinted with sadness.

At that, Princess Marey summoned a stampede of carousel horses. The horses rollicked on erratic paths toward him, but Leo had the experience of all his previous battles to draw from. Every time he dodged an equine enemy, he made sure he got that much closer to the center of the platform where Princess Marey stood.

She spun into a highspeed twirl as he approached, the edge of her skirts sharp as a knife. Leo had to be careful not to get sliced into ribbons.

“Enough already!” Leo shoved the heart fragments into Lance's mark.

Princess Marey let out an earsplitting shriek and crumpled to the ground.

The heap of lace and frills slowly shrunk back into Pensive Pierrot.

“Clocktower Kid,” he said. “Is Clocktower Kid okay?”

Leo had been starting to lose faith in the clown, but it stoked the embers of his hope that Pensive Pierrot's first thought upon returning to himself was to

ask after his friend.

“I haven't gotten to her yet,” Leo said, shaking his head.

“You mean she's still lost to the darkness? The poor thing…”

“Then come with me to her stage and help me save her! Help me defeat Lance!”

The clown shook his head. “What'll defeating Lance accomplish? Clocktower Kid doesn't want to leave Wonderworld. She wants to stay.”

“Don't use her as an excuse to keep running away from the real world.”

The clown shot a sharp glare up at him. “That's not what I'm doing!”

“You sure? Because it sure looks like you're doing whatever you can to avoid the possibility of Princess Merry not returning your feelings!” Leo hadn't started off shouting, but now he was. “You'd rather stay here in limbo than risk a broken heart!”

He felt a hand fall on his shoulder.

When he turned to look, he saw Balan.

“Little one, you needn't so harshly speak. It isn't his fault humans are weak. You trap yourselves in purgatories of your own devising and tire yourselves out with endless agonizing. Easy prey for negativity to devour when you are at your weakest hour.”

Leo shrugged out from under Balan's touch.

“I gave you back the courage you'd lost, Pensive. Use it to help me fight Lance. Use it to go back to the real world and finally tell the princess how you feel!”

But the clown only shook his head. “There's no way she'd ever feel the same about me. No, I'd rather stay here in Wonderworld.”

“So, you're cool with Clocktower Kid being a monster forever?” snapped Leo, feeling his face flush with rage.

Pensive Pierrot flinched. “She'll be okay,” he mumbled. “She's got you to save her.”

Leo let out an aggravated sigh, then turned and left the clown where he was.

The One That Used to Be Clocktower Kid

“Freed from Lance's darkness your friends may be, yet to fight alongside you, not one will agree,” lamented Balan, a sharp edge to his smirk. “Speaking of fighting, you've been putting off facing a certain someone. But avoiding Clocktower Kid won't help in the long run.”

Streetbeat-Leo looked away. He did not want to give Balan the satisfaction of seeing how right he was.

“I can't fight her. She's just a little kid. If I have to, I'll face Lance by myself.”

“Because attacking unaided went just as you planned, when you and Emma made your ill-fated stand.” Balan shook his head in exasperation. “It won't even hurt her, and still you dither? Very well, then in darkness she'll wither. Let me ask you the same question you posed Pensive, however: are you cool letting Clocktower Kid be a monster forever?”

Leo ground his teeth. “You've made your point.”

Balan smiled, brushing the brim of his top hat.

Clocktower Kid's town was divided into sections that now floated in midair. Leo figured this was her attempt to protect her stage from Fighter and Balan. She had probably laid a bunch of traps everywhere, too.

Still, it was a relief to see it was still as cute and cheerful as it had been when he first visited.

He headed toward the clocktower in the center of town, sensing that is where she would be.

Seeing the state of her stage put him at ease, but he should not have relaxed so quickly. He triggered a trap almost right away.

He stepped onto a block that zipped out from under him so quickly, even his lightning-fast reflexes were no use in keeping him from falling flat on his face.

He shut his eyes to draw upon the stage's power.

When he opened them again, he was dressed in a costume called Chrono Bunny. As he looked it over, he came to understand its ability.

It had the power to stop time.

Probably because that's what she wanted more than anything when the accident happened… To stop time in its tracks.

Poor Clocktower Kid. Leo felt awful for her.

He made his way through her stage. Now that he could stop time, it did not matter how fast the traps sprung or how many Negati attacked him.

But he knew the monster that used to be Clocktower Kid would have the same ability.

He couldn't imagine what their battle might look like.

After some time, he found the Heartrees and recovered the two fragments of Clocktower Kid's heart.

This one's the part of her that loves cats, and this one's the part of her that has the courage to face reality.

He let out a sigh.

She's too little to even need *the courage to face reality…*

He really, really did not want to fight her.

Even if it was the only way to save her from the negativity, he knew it was going to hurt her.

Suddenly he noticed a little stuffed animal at his feet.

And not just any stuffed animal: a kitten.

There had been all sorts of stuffed animals on Clocktower Kid's stage the first time he visited, but never any cats.

He knew that was because her subconscious had blocked out anything to do with cats after the accident. Maybe, now that she had lost herself to negativity, that block had come undone.

The kitten at Leo's feet looked up at him.

There was no doubt in Leo's mind that Clocktower Kid herself had created it. It had such a terribly lonely look on its little face.

You miss her too, don't you? How she used to be, anyway…

He thought of the monster she had turned into, feeling sad.

There's no way can I leave her like that. I promised I wouldn't.

He gave the toy kitten a good cuddle, making sure to scratch it behind its ears, and then made his way to an entrance that led beneath the clocktower. Clocktower Kid—or the thing that *had* been her, at least—was down there. He could feel it.

When he turned, he saw Clocktower Kid's illusion, cradling the kitten in her arms and looking at him with a worried expression.

“Don't worry about me,” he said, and made his way slowly down the stairs.

Down and down he went, into dim depths where the light from outside barely reached.

Suddenly loud laughter split the silence.

His gaze snapped toward where the sound was coming from and saw the monster that had once been Clocktower Kid.

She was called Purrla now, and she was giant—a hundred times Leo's weight, at least. The monstrous feline wasted no time in leaping straight for him.

He dodged her attack just in time, shouting, “It's me! It's Streetbeat!”

But of course, he might as well be a stranger to her now. She wheeled around and tried to pounce on him again, and again.

With the others, Leo had weakened them enough that he could get close and thrust the heart fragments into Lance's mark, but he did not want to do that to Clocktower Kid. He wanted this to be as painless as possible for her.

If I can get it in one go…

He dodged and rolled around her attacks as he aimed for the mark.

But Purrla's movements were too erratic for him to get a clear shot. This was shaping up to be his toughest fight yet.

Her pounces were dangerous enough on their own, but he also had to watch out for the deadly shockwaves that rocked the earth every time her body hit the ground.

I just need one shot…

Leo had danced for days on end in Wonderworld and never tired, but his face was flushed and sweaty.

Now!

The monster vanished the moment Leo made to throw the fragments. His intuition prickled, and he turned to see the monster had appeared behind him. Then there came a sharp ache in his chest, and he saw his costume was shredded.

What happened!?

He had been so focused on ending this in one shot, he'd completely forgotten about Purrla's ability.

She stopped time and attacked me!

Well, two can play at that game.

Leo made a show of throwing the fragments again. The moment he lifted his hand, he stopped time. So did Purrla.

Now they were both frozen, and when time started again, it started for both.

But Purrla had not realized that detail. Thinking Leo was still frozen in time, she stalked toward him.

Just a little closer…

Now!

He thrust the fragments into Lance's mark.

Dismay spread across Purrla face at her prey's unexpected movement.

The negativity started to flake off her until all that was left was Clocktower Kid, lying on her side. When her eyes fluttered open, Leo saw they shimmered wetly.

“Why'd you bring me back to normal?” she asked, tears slipping down her cheeks. “In the negativity, I didn't have to think about what happened to that poor kitty. Why'd you have to go and make me remember?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Leo started, but stopped as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Balan.

“Streetbeat didn't make you remember because you never forgot. Not before your monstrous change, nor while with negativity you were wrought. You've never stopped mourning your feline friend. The wound deep in your heart has yet to mend.”

Leo felt some of his guilt lift at Balan's words. “You can't keep going like this, Clocktower Kid.”

“Says who? I just want to forget about the kitty I got killed, and live in Wonderworld with Pensive forever and ever.”

Leo started to take a step toward her, but Balan stopped him. The man slipped off his top hat, stroking Clocktower Kid's turquoise hair.

Leo only caught a brief glimpse of the man's face before the hat was back in its usual position, but he was surprised to see Balan was just as handsome

as Lance. And what was more, for that instant, the grin had slipped from Balan's features, replaced by a look of bitter sadness.

“Be patient with yourself, little one, as you heal. It takes time to recover from such an awful ordeal.” He squeezed Clocktower Kid's hand.

Leo put his hand on both of theirs.

“Look, when you're—when you're feeling up to it, we can go back to the real world together and look for the cat. And if…you know…I'll help you make a nice resting place for it. Okay?”

At that, Leo and Balan left Clocktower Kid to her stage.

“Now there remains only one: Lady of the Midnight Sun.” Balan's eyes were unfocused, seeming caught on something in the distance as they walked.

“You know her story?”

“That you could say—in a way,” was his vague reply.

The One That Used to Be Lady of the Midnight Sun

Lady of the Midnight Sun's stage no longer matched her name. Instead of everlasting afternoon, the town had been plunged into an endless polar night with no hope of sunrise.

Snow drifted on the breeze. The river and lake were frozen solid.

Lady of the Midnight Sun's illusion was pointing to the top of the cliff, though the ground was so slippery that climbing up there seemed all but

impossible.

Streetbeat-Leo shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was in a costume called Frost Fairy. The vestments looked woven out of ice itself, glittering with all the beauty of fresh snow.

Leo spread his hands out in front of him, and in the air appeared a gigantic snowflake, big enough for him to stand on.

Gingerly, he tested his weight on the snowflake, but he did not need to worry. It was sturdy enough to bear him, and then some.

Creating snowflake after snowflake, Leo made his way steadily up to the clifftop.

He thought he would find a Heartree up here, but it wasn't just the one. It was both of them, entwined together.

Weird.

None of the others' Heartrees had been like this.

Plus, the negative barrier surrounding the trees looked more than twice as thick as normal.

As one, the Tims rammed into the barrier. It did not disappear, but the Tims still got smaller, their color fading.

Even as weakened as they were, they geared up to ram the barrier a second time.

“No, wait!” called Leo, but the Tims launched into the barrier before he could stop them.

They bounced off it again and started to flicker and vanish.

“You okay!?” Leo picked up one of the tiny Tims, cradling it in his arms.

He wasn't sure what the expression on its face meant, but there was no mistaking the tears pooling in its eyes.

It must be really painful for them to ram into negativity like that…

“I'm such an idiot,” he muttered, angry with himself for not realizing that sooner.

“I'm so sorry…”

The Tim chirped as if in response to his apology.

He set the Tim back down and studied the Heartrees. There was a tiny crack spiderwebbing through the negative barrier where it had been struck.

“I'll finish what you started.”

Leo wound up a punch, focusing all his strength into it—and let it fly.

His blow bounced right off the barrier, and agony like he'd never known before sang up his arm.

He screamed in pain and collapsed to the ground, gasping and panting. Once his breathing finally evened out, he turned to face the Heartrees again.

The crack had gotten bigger.

Leo pulled his fist back again and threw everything he had into another strike.

* * *

Suddenly he was on his back, blinking blearily into the dark night. He wasn't sure how long he had been lying there. His whole body ached. The

pain must have made him pass out.

The Tims were gathered around him, worry on their fuzzy faces.

He rolled his head over and saw the two heart fragments glittering on the ground beside him.

He'd done it.

He picked up the heart fragments, turning them over in his hands.

The part of her that loves people, and the part of her that can accept love from others…

That must be why both trees had grown in the same place and been so tightly intertwined. The fragments were two sides of the same coin.

But out of all the fragments he had collected so far, something told him the ones Lady of the Midnight Sun had thrown away were the most important.

And that was enough for him to get a sense of just how powerful she really was.

Plus, she hadn't set any traps or anything on her stage. That must mean she had enough confidence to take out Leo all on her own, in whatever monstrous form she had turned into.

He shuddered a little at the thought.

But Lady of the Midnight Sun's illusion still stood, silent and expressionless, pointing.

So that's where I'll find her, huh?

Leo delved through the stage. It got chillier and chillier the further he went. Just when he thought he couldn't bear it any longer, something other than the cold made him freeze.

Out of the ice appeared the monster that had once been Lady of the Midnight Sun.

She looks like…

Leo's breath hitched in his throat.

She looks like Death itself.

Her face was sharp and pale, her body nothing but bones. Leo knew better to think she was as frail as she looked. Her slender fingers crooked in sinuous movements that seemed a beckon to the afterlife.

He couldn't comprehend this creature having come from Lady of the Midnight Sun.

The tiny spark of beauty he had found in the other monsters was utterly absent from her.

The monster—the Grim Creeper—hurled a ring of ice right at him.

Leo barely dodged in time; the ice only grazed him, but it left a huge gash where it had brushed against his costume. The edges were sharper than the sharpest sword.

And it wasn't just the ice rings he had to worry about. Lady of the Midnight Sun was dead set on protecting her stage, so she was throwing everything she had at him. Deadly icicles hurtled down out of the sky, threatening to skewer him if he made one wrong move.

He took every care not to.

“Knock it off already!” Leo yelled, even though he knew it was pointless. She couldn't understand him.

The way Grim Creeper fought was on a totally different level from the other monsters.

He had his work cut out for him, dodging around the blade-edged rings and icicles as he tried to find Lance's mark.

He finally spotted it encased in her ribs.

But finding it didn't do him much good now that she was ramping up her attacks. There was ice everywhere. It did not matter how quick on his feet he was if he couldn't keep his footing on the slippery ground.

She was driving him into a corner.

I'm gonna lose…

But then he remembered the Tims, the way they had rammed into the Heartrees for him time and again.

They never gave up, so I won't either!

He pressed onward, closing the gap between him and Grim Creeper no matter how many times the ice slashed him.

Just as he felt his consciousness beginning to slip away, he saw Lance's mark appear right in front of him. He scraped up the last of his strength and hurled the heart fragments into it.

Anguish warped Grim Creeper's face as she sank slowly to her knees and turned back into Lady of the Midnight Sun.

“Father… Mother…” she mumbled without sparing a glance for Leo, her erstwhile foe. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

“Why did you get rid of the part of you that loves people, and the part of you that can accept love from others?”

Lady of the Midnight Sun snapped her head up, glaring at him. “Why are *you* trying to destroy my stage!? This is the only place I can forget about my parents, and you're trying to take that away!”

“What?” he said, rattled by her accusing tone. “Do you hate them? Your mom and dad.”

She gave a violent shake of her head. “No—I love them! *Loved*, I should say! And they loved me. They loved me so much that they stayed up all night and all day to take care of me when I got sick. They loved me so much that they were happier than I was when I won my piano competition. They loved me so much that they took one bite of the first meal I ever cooked and told me it was the most delicious thing they'd eaten in their whole lives.”

“Then why do you want to forget about them?”

“They—they wanted to get me something special for Christmas. They left me at home so it would be a surprise. I remember waving at them as they drove off. It wasn't much longer after that I got the call. There'd been an accident. I want to forget that in the real world, they're never coming home.”

“I… That's awful,” stammered Leo, at a loss for what else to say.

“You don't know the first *thing* about awful! The more you love someone, the more they love you—the more it hurts when they die. Every time you think about them, every time you remember something—it hurts and it hurts and it hurts. That's why I stopped loving anyone after my parents were gone, and why I stopped letting anyone love me. I didn't want to be hurt

anymore. I want to forget about anyone I loved and anyone who loved me, and just stay here alone in my stage.”

Sobbing, gasping for breath, Lady of the Midnight Sun crumpled to her knees, seeming to have exhausted herself shouting.

Leo blinked and saw Balan standing beside her. He took off his top hat again, and this time, Leo got a better look at his face.

His usual grin was gone, and he beheld Lady of the Midnight Sun with an intensely sorrowful gaze.

Balan crouched beside her, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder.

For a while he did not move or say anything. When he finally spoke, it was like he had to wring each word out of the fabric of his being. “I wish I could say your suffering's done, but I fear that it's only just begun. There's no fast way through this, no shortcut to take, though I hope you'll weather the distance for your dear parents' sake. They wouldn't want to see you in pain, to see you throw life and love down the drain.”

With that, Balan and Leo left Lady of the Midnight Sun to her thoughts and slipped off through the snow.

A long silence stretched between them as they walked. Then Balan said, “Tell me, Leo, if you're so inclined—whatever is it that's on your mind?”

“I was thinking about what you said back there, about her parents. Wondering what they would want for her.”

“Ah—yes. Care to venture a guess?”

“I think they'd want her to love and be loved. And to be happy and to laugh a lot.”

That made Balan smile.

“You know, little one, that sounds about right.” He patted Leo encouragingly on the back. “But to make that happen, there's Lance still to fight.”

“Wherever he is.”

Without a word, Balan lifted a finger. Leo looked where he was pointing and saw Fighter's illusion.

“Fighter-Emma has you covered. The way to Lance's stronghold it seems she's discovered. She's quite good at pathfinding, you know—after all, it was she who led you to this stage full of snow.”

But Fighter had a long, ragged tear in her costume.

“No, no, no—the battle shouldn't have started yet,” cried Balan. “Quickly now, Leo—Emma alone shouldn't face that threat!”

Another tear appeared in the illusion's costume.

Leo ran.

He didn't know how long he ran.

He didn't notice when everything had become shrouded in darkness, nor when Balan and the Tims had disappeared from his side.

From somewhere up ahead, he could feel pulses of immense power.

Guess I'm the only one Lance wants to see.

He kept walking. Suddenly a tidal wave of Negati swelled up all around him, whirlpooling closer and closer.

“Get—get out of my way.” Though he had barely whispered the command, he saw a shudder ripple through the Negati.

Leo knew, somehow, that even though there were thousands of them and only one of him, they wouldn't dare touch him now. He stepped forward; the wall of Negati drew back, parting into a path.

At the end of the path, he found Lance, glowing with the dark luminescence of negativity. And at his feet, her costume torn to shreds, lay Fighter-Emma. Leo rushed to her at once.

“Sorry,” she said, drawing short, shallow breaths as she looked up at him. “I tried…but I couldn't beat him…”

“Why?” Leo shouted at Lance. “You didn't have to hurt her!”

“She is Balan's ally, and therefore my enemy. And now so are you, I am sad to see,” said Lance with a shake of his head. “No matter—I just have to begin anew. Seal away everyone's memories again, once I defeat you. Back to normal your stages will go. Just like everyone wanted, I'll make it so.”

“That's not what any of us want! Not really!”

“Not really, you say—is that so? Then I suppose what *is* real, you think you know.”

“Yeah, I do!”

Slowly Lance began to rise into the air, stroking the tentacles protruding from his back.

Then, suddenly, there were five of him.

“Show me then, if you know real from fake—which one is me, and which are just shadows in my wake?”

Lance let out a scornful laugh.

Leo donned Tornado Wolf, keeping a close eye on the Lance's every move.

The five of them smirked, then launched themselves at Leo one after another.

Lance was way faster than any of the other monsters. Leo could barely evade the attacks in time. He dodged the last Lance's blow by a hair, pivoted to Lance Number Two, and threw a punch as hard as his costume would let him.

But Lance caught his fist without any effort at all.

“Well done indeed, and done very well,” said Lance, lifting an eyebrow. He almost sounded impressed. “You found the real me—but how could you tell?”

“The other ones didn't hold back when they attacked me. You did, if only a little.”

Lance tilted his head. “How curious that I acted so meek. It was not my intention, but I suppose my heart is still weak. That won't do, that won't do at all.” He closed his eyes. “I'll have to rely on my true form to finish this brawl.”

Negati flocked to him by the hundreds, clinging to every inch of his body. Leo watched in horror as Lance transformed into an even larger, more powerful, more hideous monster, covered head to toe in those marks of his.

He was negativity incarnate. Tentacles unfurled out of a massive bulk embellished with countless marks. The other monsters had been horrible, but they had all retained at least some small vestige of the human they had

once been—but not this one. This one exuded nothing but the pure, horrifying, revolting power of negativity.

And now that Leo saw it, he knew its true name: Shadow Lance.

It swept one of its fat tentacles toward Leo, whipping up whirlwinds in its path.

The tornadoes locked on, turning to bear down on him even when he dodged out of the way. They were nothing like the twisters Scarecrow had used when he had been a monster. Those ones had been made of air, after all—these ones were pure negativity, howling at high speeds.

And they just kept coming, one after another.

I can't keep this up, Leo thought desperately, sweat slicking his forehead.

He lost count of how many there were, but he didn't need to know their exact number to know there were too many to dodge.

Guess I better go on the offensive, then!

Steeling himself, Leo lunged toward Shadow Lance, striking a blow at one of his marks. As soon as his fist connected, a blast of negative power burst from the mark and disintegrated his costume.

The agony that filled him was worse than when he struck Lady of the Midnight Sun's Heartrees. It was pain unlike anything Leo had ever known.

All that, and it didn't seem to have even rattled Shadow Lance. One of the marks disappeared, but that was it. With a motion like he was shooing a fly, Shadow Lance sent the half-fainted Leo flying away.

Leo gave a groan as he struggled to his feet. Shadow Lance watched him with a cold stare.

His legs threatening to give out from under him, Leo changed into Chrono Bunny, hoping against hope the costume's clock-stopping ability would help him.

Thank goodness—it worked.

He sprang at Shadow Lance. But the monster had only *looked* frozen in time, and batted Leo away again before he could react.

“You think you can best me with that little trick? Here in my stage, you have no more power than a fly or a tick!”

Leo collapsed to his knees. He didn't have the strength to keep fighting.

He struggled as one of Shadow Lance's tentacles wrapped itself around him, but his flailing only made it crush him tighter.

As his vision blurred and faded, he saw two glowing somethings zip through the air. They crashed into Shadow Lance, sending up a shower of sparks before plummeting to the ground and flickering out.

It was Sentinel and Watcher. They lay unmoving where they had fallen.

They were both clad in costumes, not of negative power, but of the positivity that Streetbeat-Leo himself had been drawing upon. But their costumes were now shredded and scorched from where they had collided with Lance's marks.

“Sorry…we're late…” Leo knew the pain Sentinel must be in, but the firefighter still managed a bashful smile. “Not really…living up to my name…if I don't protect you…”

“That goes for me, too,” said Watcher, struggling to her feet despite the wounds covering her body.

Though they were worse for wear, their positive power seemed to have dealt some damage to Shadow Lance in return. Two of his marks had disappeared.

Two more glowing somethings crashed into the monster.

“You'll pay for what you turned Clocktower Kid into,” growled the first—Pensive Pierrot.

The second—Clocktower Kid—nodded emphatically. “He's not the only one ready to kick your butt. Any enemy of Pensive's an enemy of mine!”

Light after light hurtled into Shadow Lance, staggering the monster back.

“Sorry I hemmed and hawed for so long,” said Scarecrow.

“I couldn't give up on my dream after all,” said Skygazer.

“Me either,” said Seagazer. “A life without the ocean is no life at all.”

They flew at Shadow Lance, their costumes shimmering with positive power.

“I know you loved us, in your own way,” said Bugsy, aiming for one of Lance's marks. “So I'm sorry about this, but my butterflies need me.”

“You'd turn on me—each of you, every last one?” Bitterness laced Shadow Lance's voice. “After all I have loved you, all I have given and done!?”

“What kind of adults would we be if we let children fight our battles for us?” said Madam of the Mansion, as she and Invisible Custodian rushed the monster.

One after another, Lance's marks vanished.

“I've faced more formidable foes.” Checkered King landed a punch where the staggering Shadow Lance showed him an opening.

The monster fell to his knees at last, but there were still two marks left.

“Is that all you've got? Your every attack? Because if it is, victory I nmine—and *I'll have you back*.”

Lance lifted his hand, but a blinding light flashed through the air and crashed into him.

It was Lady of the Midnight Sun.

She fell without a word, fainting with a sad smile on her face.

Leo looked at each of his wounded friends, scattered across the ground around him.

I know how much you wanted to stay on your stages… How much they meant to you. Yet you still came to help me…

He tore his eyes from his friends to glare at Shadow Lance and saw Fighter-Emma, struggling to stand.

No!

Leo didn't even have time to shout the word before she charged at the monster.

Not at the last mark, but at the tentacle still binding Leo.

Her blow weakened its grip around him, and he rolled himself free.

Here goes nothing—

Leo gathered the very last dregs of his power, then rammed himself into Lance's mark.

Light—negative and positive both—exploded around them.

When the brilliance finally faded away, Leo saw Lance lying at the explosion's epicenter, back to the form he'd had the first time they'd met.

“You may not believe it's true,” he murmured sadly as he faded away before Leo's very eyes, “but I only ever loved all of you.”

And then he was gone.

“It's…it's over.” Leo looked at Emma, and at each of his friends in turn as they all stirred awake again.

“I…” He scrubbed his face with his sleeve. “Thank you. All of you.”

A sudden brightness flooded the dark, and Leo squinted into it, confused. When had they gotten to the Balan Theatre?

Balan himself stood before them, applauding. “Well done, little one—well done!”

Leo's friends rose slowly to their feet.

“I passed your test,” said Leo loudly.

Balan grinned.

“You defeated Lance, certainly. But that—well, that wasn't your *real* test, you see.”

“What!?”

“Never fear, little one, you still passed! But I knew you wouldn't do exactly as I asked. If I'd said outright your test was to find people to trust and befriend, why, you'd stubbornly refuse until the bitter end! So, to you a slightly different task I set—which, for defeating Lance, my many thanks you get! Now that his power has waned, Wonderworld has once again balance regained.”

As he spoke, Balan started growing see-through, as did the entire theater and the Tims.

“What's happening?” said Leo, echoing his friends' shocked exclamations.

“The time for you to leave Wonderworld is here. Since you no longer need the Balan Theatre, it will disappear. Perhaps you'll find it once more if your heart ever again goes astray. Or perhaps not—who is to say? But with full certainty this I *can* declare: it was a delight to have you, my friends, a joy beyond compare.”

Balan doffed his top hat and swept into a low bow.

Clocktower Kid's eyes widened in surprise. “You're better looking than I thought!”

“Thank you, thank you. I'm flattered, to tell it true.”

Emma snickered.

“You're certainly *nicer* than any of us thought.”

“Why, *am* I?” Balan spun his top hat back on his head, grinning that grin of his.

With the lavish theater fading fast around them, Leo and his friends crowded close around Balan.

“Go back where you came from, you lot—dawdle here much longer you really ought not,” he said with a shooing motion.

Without warning, Emma flung her arms around Balan. Bewilderment flickered across his face.

Leo didn't want to say goodbye to the Tims. And annoying as Balan had been at the beginning, the man had grown on him. Leo joined Emma in

hugging him, but Balan put a gentle hand on his back and gave him a soft push toward the exit.

Everyone chatted as they walked toward the front doors, stealing glances back over their shoulders.

“We're gonna stay friends even once we get back to the real world, right?” asked Emma. Everyone nodded emphatically.

Including, of course, Leo.

“I'm going to perfect my flying machine,” vowed Skygazer.

“I'll head back to the ocean,” said Seagazer. “Though I think it's a bit too soon to start swimming again just yet…”

“I kind of made fun of everyone for being so into the Eltrandos, but they might be cool to see. Think we can catch them tonight?” Leo asked Emma.

“The meteor shower? The news said it was only for the one night.”

“The Eltrandos, hm?” Pensive Pierrot frowned in thought. “I haven't heard of them. But I know what I need to do. I'm going back to Christmas Rose Park and telling the princess how I feel. She might not feel the same, but I'll never know unless I say something. If I don't, all that time I spent in Wonderworld will have been for nothing.”

“Christmas Rose Park? Where's that? I've never heard of it before.” Clocktower Kid had a sad look in her eyes as she took the clown's hand. “Though I guess I ought to go back to that clocktower…”

Beside Checkered King stood his queen, fading away with the Tims and everything else.

“You aren't my wife,” said Checkered King to the queen, who regarded him sorrowfully. “You're just…my memories of her. No amount of wishing will bring her back.”

He embraced her.

“You were born of my heart, so to my heart you should return.”

At that, a wide smile lit the queen's face. She touched her lips to Checkered King's cheek, then faded away into his chest.

Checkered King held his arms around the empty air where the queen had been for a little while longer, tears streaming down his cheeks.

With that, Leo, Emma, and their twelve friends stepped out of the Balan Theatre.

No one remained in the Balan Theatre save for Balan himself, the Tims, and a few lingering Negati.

After sending everyone on their way home, Balan turned and made his way to the heart of the theater. There he found Lance, as transparent as a ghost.

Balan let out a light snort.

“Masquerading as Wonderworld's maestro was quite ill-advised. I hope I can take this to mean you've been properly chastised.”

Lance's eyes fluttered open.

“It was no masquerade, not in the sense you imply. But I suppose yes, by omission I did lie. To call myself maestro I indeed have cause—not of Wonderworld *now*, but Wonderworld that *was*.”

“Oh?”

“I was the one who kept positive and negative powers in harmony. Before I was called *Lance*, my name was *Balan*, you see.”

“No—”

“Denying it won't make it any less true. But now I have a question for you. Have you *any* memory of the real world you can recall? Three thousand years it's been, after all.”

Balan's breath hitched in his throat. “No, I… Why—”

“Before *you* became Balan, it was my part to play. But I grew too close to the humans, and to their sorrow and sadness fell prey. Balan no longer but Lance I became, and negativity began laying upon Wonderworld its claim. To save, there was only one thing I could do, and that was to create a new Balan: you.” A faint smile played across Lance's lips. “But now you're falling in love with them too. Be careful, Balan—or *Lance* they'll soon call you.”

“Never,” shouted Balan. “That won't happen—ever!”

“Honestly, enough with the self-deception. You normally take everyone's memories when they leave, so why this time did you make an exception?”

“Why? Because—I…” Balan took a flustered step back.

“And what is that running down your cheek? Don't tell me your eyes have started to leak.”

Balan jerked a hand up to his face. When he pulled his fingers back, they were wet with tears.

“Face it, you don't stand a chance. It's only a matter of time until you become Lance.”

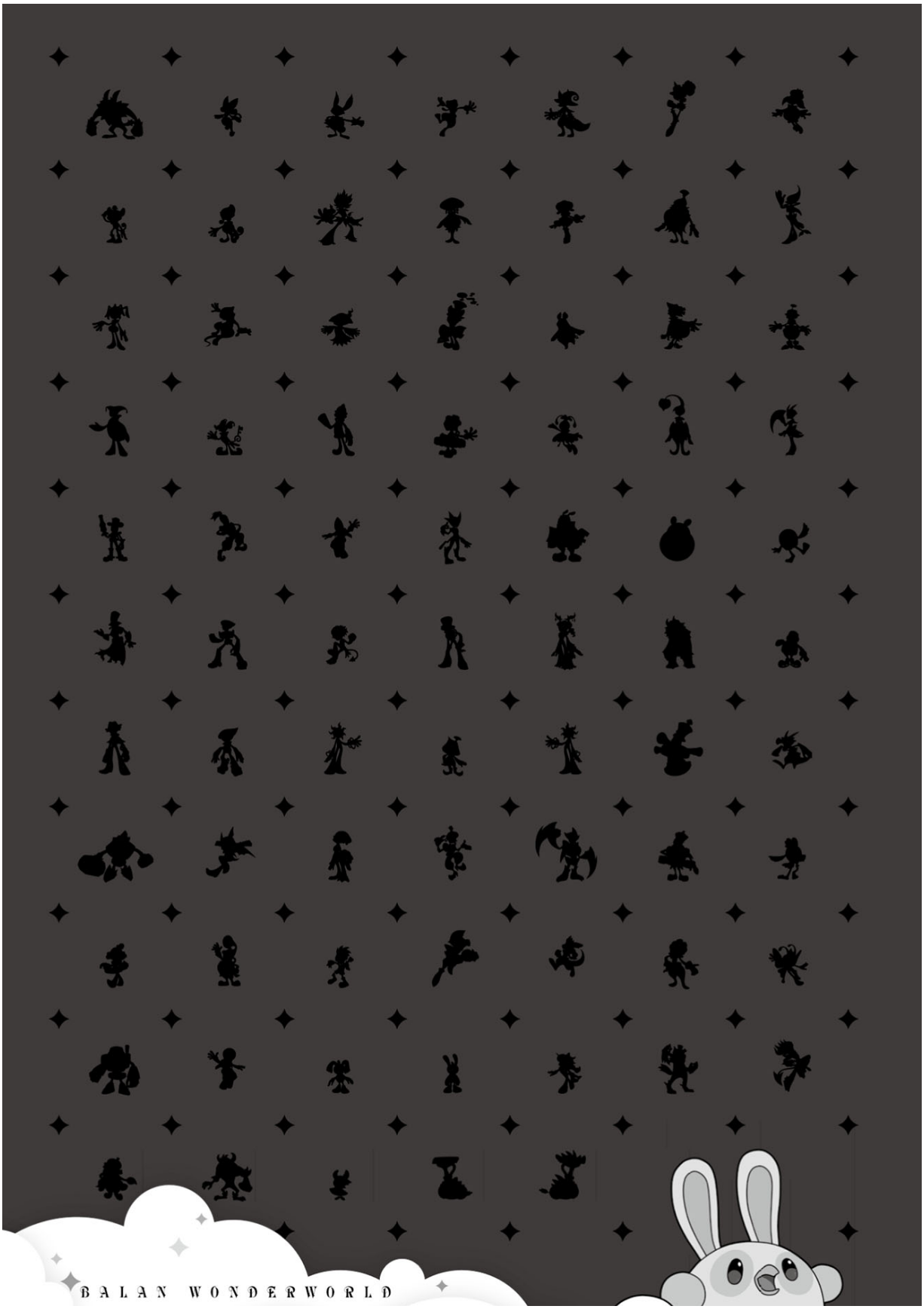
“I don't—I won't—”

Slowly, Lance got to his feet, a small, sad smile playing across his features. “That's what I said, too,” he muttered. “But it was too late for me, and it's too late for you.”

Balan gave a furious shake of his head. “I swear on my top hat, *I will not end up like that!*”

Lance wandered slowly away into Wonderworld, his weakened Negati stumbling after him.

“Do you hear me?” Balan shouted after his retreating form. “I refuse to share your destiny!”


BALAN WONDERWORLD

IV After

Attilio Caccini, the Pensive Pierrot

Attilio, the Pensive Pierrot, held Clocktower Kid's hand as he stepped out of the theater doors.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the light outside. Eventually he grew accustomed to the brightness enough to squint at his surroundings.

He stood in the central plaza of Christmas Rose Park. The Balan Theatre was nowhere to be seen.

Where is everyone? He could have sworn he had exited the theater with all his friends right beside him, but they were gone. Even Clocktower Kid, whose hand he'd been holding tight.

What's going on?

Balan's parting words echoed in his ears: “Go back where you came from, you lot—dawdle here much longer you really ought not.”

We all came from different places, so we must have returned to different places, too.

None of them had suspected they would be separated the moment they stepped foot out of the theater, so they hadn't told one another their real names, or where they lived, or anything.

Images of Checkered King's queen disappearing back into him flashed through Attilio's mind.

Could…could Clocktower Kid—all of them—have been created from my heart like that, too?

The thought filled him with desperate dread, but he knew it couldn't be true. After all, his left hand was still warm from where Clocktower Kid had held it.

She's real. She's just…somewhere else. Wherever it was she found the Balan Theatre. We'll find each other again, I'm sure of it—all of us. But I've got a lot of self-improvement to do before then…

He glanced at his wristwatch.

Barely any time at all had passed here since he went into the Balan Theatre. They'd be getting ready for the first parade of the day right about now. Attilio the Pensive Pierrot steeled himself and set off at a brisk pace through the park.

It was still a bit too early for the parade crew to have arrived just yet—but when he got there, he found Princess Merry, getting ready by herself.

She tilted her head ever so slightly when she noticed the clown.

His heart flailed wildly against his ribs.

He took off his mask. “I have something to tell you, and if it makes you laugh, well… Then I suppose I've done my job at least. Princess—I…I have

feelings for you. I always have.”

For a long time, she only stared at him. Then she lifted a hand to peel off her silver wig.

“I've been waiting a decade to hear you say that, Pensive.”

Attilio gaped at the turquoise hair spilling over her shoulders.

“Princess…?”

“You called me Clocktower Kid, ten years ago,”

He peered into her face and knew it was her. There was no mistaking those features. But he didn't understand—Clocktower Kid had been, well, a *kid* just a moment ago, but the princess before him was at least twenty years old.

“My real name is Cass Milligan. After I left the Balan Theatre, I looked everywhere for the Christmas Rose Park you were talking about, but I couldn't find it. It made me afraid that I'd simply made up Wonderworld, imagined all the friends I'd made there. But I could still feel your hand in mine, so I knew…I knew it had to be real. As soon as I realized that, I got word they were building this park.”

“Then…we must have gone into the Balan Theatre *years* apart…”

“Years and miles apart, yes. It's been ten years since I went into the theater. Since I returned.”

“Ten whole years…”

“I knew what I had to do. I got voice lessons, studied acting, auditioned for the role of princess here at the park. And when I got it, I waited. For you.”

“You should have told me—”

“Told you what happened in the future, you mean?” Cass the Clocktower Kid gave him a gentle grin. “What if I told you, and changed the past or something?”

Suddenly Attilio remembered.

“What happened to…to your kitten?”

“I steeled myself and went back to the clocktower. She was fine, didn't even have a scratch on her. I called her over and she came right over and rubbed herself all over my legs. She isn't a kitten anymore, but she still struts about the clocktower like she owns the place. She's got lots of babies and grandbabies to keep her company, too.”

“What a relief…”

“You're telling me.”

“And the others?”

“I found one of them. We're still friends.”

“Who?”

“Come on, I'll show you.”

A gentle breeze twirled around them, sashaying through the silver wig in Cass the Clocktower Kid's hand and filling Attilio with a strange nostalgia.

She offered him her hand, and he took it.

It was as warm as it had been when they'd left the Balan Theatre together.

“Ten years I've been waiting to hold your hand again,” said Cass, grinning even as tears slipped down her cheek.

Cal Suresh, the Checkered King

“Thanks for all your help.”

“You've improved quite a bit since our last lesson,” said Cal Suresh, the Checkered King, with a smile. “At this rate, you'll be a champion in no time.”

“You think so?”

The child's eyes glittered in wonder.

“Depends on how hard you work for it. But the most important thing you can do is stay passionate, and never forget how much you love playing.”

Cal was a chess champion himself, once. For a time, they said he was unbeatable.

It got to his head, made him lose sight of himself.

The world of chess is a vicious one, and no one can reign supreme forever. The next generation of players rose up and snatched Cal's throne out from under him. He couldn't seem to win a single game even against younger, less experienced opponents. Reclaiming his former glory became an obsession that eclipsed all else in his life. Even his wife, whose illness he never noticed was growing worse until it was too late.

His love for chess soured into hatred. Then he went into the Balan Theatre.

The theater helped heal him. When he returned home, he renovated one of his rooms and opened a chess workshop. It didn't take long for him to build up a clientele of children all eager to learn from a former champion—Checkered King, as he was known in the Balan Theatre.

Cal glanced at his wristwatch.

Cass had called him yesterday, told him Pensive Pierrot had finally confessed his feelings for her. Took the clown long enough. The two were due to visit him any minute now.

“I'd better get started on our refreshments,” he said happily to himself, and headed into the kitchen.

After he'd left Wonderworld, cooking had become a new passion of his, surpassed only by his love of chess.

The young boy that had defeated Cal all those years ago was champion now. Some time ago, he'd started coming by for monthly visits.

They would chat all things chess while they dined on the delicious fare Cal prepared for them. During one of their visits, Cal learned why he'd been smiling when they'd played against one another during that fierce match.

The boy told him how happy he had been to finally play against the champion he'd long admired, but how, when their match was over, he felt so bereft.

Now, good food and good conversation brought Cal the same joy he felt teaching chess to kids.

But the boy wasn't coming by today. Today he was hosting Clocktower Kid and Pensive Pierrot—or Attilio Caccini, he should say.

Memories of Wonderworld swirled in his head as he stirred fragrant soup on the stovetop. The doorbell rang, breaking his reverie.

Cal tore the apron off over his head and hurried to the foyer.

He opened the door to see Cass the Clocktower Kid and Attilio the Pensive Pierrot standing on his front step.

“Welcome, welcome! My, but it is good to see you again, Pensive. It's been far too long.”

“It has? How long ago did you leave Wonderworld, Checkered King?”

“Seven years, give or take.”

Pensive Pierrot studied Cal's face a moment, noting the subtle signs of those extra years. He was indeed older, but the kindness in the crinkle of his eyes was the same, and so was the warmth of his smile.

“It took me about a year to find Checkered King after I left Wonderworld,” said Cass. “Can you believe he's a celebrity? I couldn't tell you the first thing about chess, so I had no idea he was an undefeated world champion!”

“*Was*, yes. But I lost my title, my wife—everything. I wish you hadn't been there to see me at my lowest. You ought to have told me to pull myself together.”

“I didn't need to, because I knew you would.” Cass flashed an impish grin at the grumbling Cal. “But hey—something smells *divine*. What treat have you got in store for us today?”

“I never knew you liked to cook.”

Cal smiled at Attilio. “Almost about as much as I like chess. It makes me so happy to entertain my friends with good food and drink.” His face fell a little bit. “But I'm afraid the cheese I ordered for our appetizer hasn't arrived yet…”

“What kind of cheese is it?”

“Imported from the south. Hardly anyone's heard of it, but when I found it, I just knew it would go perfectly with what I was planning for today.”

But as he spoke, the bell chimed again. He opened the door to see a courier holding a big wooden crate.

“What perfect timing!” A huge grin on his face, Cal took the parcel from the courier and brought it in to the kitchen table.

“Wow—it's come quite the distance,” Cass said, marveling over the postage stamped to the crate.

“I'm so glad it got here in time.” Cal pried open the lid, rummaging through the wood shavings packed in to protect the contents. At last, he pulled out a bundle wrapped in newsprint and other old papers. He dusted off the shavings and carefully unwrapped it.

“Now *that* is some fine cheese,” said Cal, turning it over in his hands so they could admire it from every angle.

“Let's see if it tastes as good as it looks.”

As he went to fetch a cutting board, Cal felt as though a breeze wafted about him. Odd, considering they were inside. “Do you smell that? It sure brings me back,” he murmured, but as soon as he tried to sniff for the scent again, it vanished. The paper that had been bound about the cheese fluttered in the wind.

“Cal…” Cass pointed to the paper.

It looked like some kind of poster.

“What is this?” Cal flattened the crumpled print. He couldn't read the foreign words, but judging from the images, it was a poster advertising

some sort of art show. Cass was pointing to one of the paintings that seemed to be featuring in the gallery.

“That looks just like my stage in Wonderworld,” she said. Looking closer, they could see Cass herself was in the painting, as she would have looked when she was a child.

Then they saw the artist's photograph.

“It's Madam of the Mansion!”

Cal stared wide-eyed ad the crumpled poster in his hands, holding it out so Attilio could peer more closely at it.

“I studied this language a bit when I was in university. The artist's name is Lucy Wong. Seems like this whole exhibition is of her works, and it starts from…why, it's open now!”

“We found Madam of the Mansion,” said Cal in wonder. He took up his phone, motioning Cass and Attilio to the dining room. Beside the receiver hung a photograph of Cal when he was younger; in it, he stood with his arm around a woman who looked just like his queen in Wonderworld. “You two get yourselves some food. I'll arrange our flights.”

Lucy Wong, the Madam of the Mansion

In her exhibition hall, Lucy Wong the Madam of the Mansion spun a paintbrush absentmindedly through her fingers.

Twelve paintings hung in the gallery, each depicting her friends from Wonderworld and the scenery of their stages.

She was working now on a thirteenth which had once been covered in nothing but black.

“With each masterful stroke of her brush, Lucy Wong crafts a lush, fantastic world,” the critics had proclaimed. It was high praise, but to Lucy, she wasn't *crafting* anything—she was just putting to canvas the things she had seen.

She had only just finished the twelfth painting when the exhibition opened and decided to start working on this most recent piece right there in the gallery.

Sometimes the people who came to the exhibition would ask Lucy to sign their artbooks. She would switch from paintbrush to pen and quickly jot down her name and the date.

The black-swathed canvas stared her in the face.

She knew what she was going to paint.

For so long she'd lost sight of what she truly wanted to paint, focused as she'd been on what everyone *else* would deem valuable. But not anymore.

A painting full of warmth, gentleness, beauty—and more than anything, one that would fill any who beheld it with courage. A painting of the people she had met in Wonderworld.

The first twelve had been practice. With each one, she got closer and closer to perfecting her vision.

Lucy still wasn't quite sure if what had happened in Wonderworld had been real or not, but as soon as she finished this piece, she was going to go look for them. Her friends.

She pulled out her cherrywood palette. It had every color she needed, all ready to go.

Closing her eyes, Lucy drew in a deep breath. She loaded her brush with white pigment and made her first small stroke.

Red lines followed, and then swathes of blue, color after color crowding onto the black canvas.

The gallery and everyone in it faded from her awareness as she worked in silent concentration.

Her family brought her meals and changes of clothing. The gallery staff brought her tea and snacks and kindly allowed her to shower in the employee facilities. But she spent most of her time in front of her painting, consumed by her work. At night she would turn the gallery lights off, wrap herself in a blanket, and curl up in a corner to sleep.

Every day a reporter from her hometown would take a photo of her painting and print it in the newspaper. Thanks to that, her family told her, she was becoming quite the celebrity. People the world over were keeping up with her progress. She didn't care about any of that.

Lucy had spent today, like every other day since she began, with a paintbrush in her hand from the moment she woke up in the morning.

More people than ever flocked to the gallery to watch her at work, but Lucy the Madam of the Mansion paid them no heed.

She reached for a tube of pigment and felt as if a wind had wafted over her. Her eyes closed, she breathed in deep. The aroma it carried made her heart ache with nostalgia.

She tilted her head into the breeze, and when she opened her eyes saw three familiar faces staring at her from the front of the crowd.

“It's…it's you. Pensive Pierrot, Checkered King… And—my word, how you've *grown*, Clocktower Kid!”

The palette dropped from Lucy the Madam of the Mansion's hand with a clatter. She rushed up to embrace each of them in turn.

“It *was* real. Wonderworld—all of it.”

Clocktower Kid, who'd smiled as Lucy planted kiss after kiss upon her cheeks, grew suddenly bashful. “Hallo,” she stammered out awkwardly.

“In college. Your language I studied. A little, I can speak it.”

Lucy the Madam of the Mansion gazed at Pensive Pierrot in surprise. “Whatever do you mean, my language?”

“We the vast seas crossed, from another country came.” Checkered King beamed. “This country's cheese wrapped around, we saw you.”

He held out the wrinkled exhibition poster to Lucy.

“Oh—oh?” she said, at a loss for words.

There hadn't been a language barrier when they'd been in Wonderworld. Then again, Lucy couldn't actually recall *what* language they'd all been speaking in that place, herself included.

“Well.” Lucy hugged them all again, tears streaming down her face. “Well, this will just have to do to make you understand just how *pleased* I am to

see all of you, darlings!”

Haoyu Chang the Skygazer

Attilio the Pensive Pierrot and Haoyu the Skygazer stood atop the cliffs at the end of the peninsula looking out over the sea below.

“You're really going to do it,” said Attilio. Haoyu nodded.

No one had ever made the crossing over the Atilla Strait on a manpowered flying craft.

Haoyu himself had tried—and failed—twice.

The last time, he had crashed and landed himself in the hospital for a month while his broken ribs and fractured hipbones mended. It had been all over the news, which is how Attilio found him.

Now, Haoyu licked his finger and held it up to test the direction of the wind. Attilio the Pensive Pierrot, Cass the Clocktower Kid, Cal the Checkered King, and Lucy the Madam of the Mansion stood watching him, worry plain on all their faces.

“Don't look at me like that,” said Haoyu. “I'll be fine. Maybe I wasn't as concerned with safety as I should have been before, but now that I've been to the Balan Theatre, I've made sure to take all sorts of precautions. Helmet, pads—I took as much time to design all this protective gear as I did to engineer my flying machine. So even if I do crash again, I won't get hurt nearly as bad as I did last time.”

Attilio nodded. “I suppose people do need equal amounts of positive and negative power after all, don't they?”

“I dunno about that. But hey—big congrats to you and Cass on getting engaged!”

“Oh, no—we were trying to keep it a secret so we wouldn't overshadow your big day. What tipped you off?”

Haoyu pointed to Cass the Clocktower Kid's hand, and the engagement ring on her finger glittering in the sunlight.

“I'm glad I found out before take-off,” he said, grinning as he flung a leg over his flying machine. “Makes me feel like, if you two can take the plunge, then so can I.”

With that, he launched himself off the cliff.

He pedaled as hard and as fast as he could, but his stamina still wasn't quite what it had been. His muscles grew fatigued, and the flying machine started to lose altitude.

He wasn't even halfway across the channel when the machine dipped only a couple yards over the surface of the sea.

As he struggled to bring it aloft again, he zoomed over a ship. As he passed the craft, he looked down and saw Seagazer standing on the deck.

She had her face turned toward him, arms waving as she cried, “Skygazer!”

She's out on the water again!

“You got this, Seagazer!” he whooped, and channeled every last ounce of strength he had into his desperately pedaling legs.

Fiona Demetria the Seagazer

Fiona Demetria the Seagazer, snug in her diving suit, boarded the ship.

Her heart thudded wildly in her chest as her terror flooded back to her, as overwhelming and suffocating as the ocean had been.

Dolphins played in the waters around her craft, their curiosity piqued.

She recognized the one that had grabbed her regulator the last time she'd been on a dive. Its head was bobbing in the waves, seeming to beckon her to join them.

“It's not your fault, but I…I still can't bring myself to forgive you. I…I don't think I'm ready yet.”

Disappointment swelling inside her, Fiona the Seagazer spat the regulator out of her mouth.

“Today a no-go, too?” said the captain, eyes crinkling kindly.

“Sorry. I keep making you take me out for nothing.”

“Be patient with yourself. It takes time to recover from what you went through.” The captain started the engine again, then squinted into the sky. “What the— You see that?”

Fiona looked up at what the captain was pointing to: a manpowered flying machine.

Is that—?

She stared hard at the machine, squinting to make out its pilot.

It is *him! Skygazer! Then that channel he always talked about flying over—it was this one! Atilla!*

But as she watched, the flying machine started sinking lower and lower in the sky.

“Skygazer!” she shouted, and saw recognition light on his face as he turned to look at her.

“Come on, Skygazer!” She knew that he had heard her cheering for him when she saw the flying machine start to ascend.

She wasn't sure, but she thought she could hear him shout a faint, “You got this, Seagazer!” in return.

Every so often the flying machine dipped and stumbled. Fiona held her breath until she saw it land safely on the opposite cliffs.

“Captain,” she shouted, “stop the boat!”

The captain cut the engines.

Fiona the Seagazer took a long, deep breath, then fitted the regulator back into her mouth.

With the dolphins chattering invitation to come play in her ears, Fiona dove into the sea.

Sana Hudson, the Watcher of the Woods

The lazulibird chicks were growing up.

Sana Hudson, the Watcher of the Woods, had fought tooth and nail to create a forest reserve in the north neighborhood of a newly founded town.

And in that park, at the top of the tallest tree, she had fashioned nests for lazulibirds.

I hope they'll come back…

One mated pair had.

Sana worried so much over them, she visited the reserve every day to see how they were doing.

One day, she'd heard their babies chirping happily in the nest.

Thank goodness!

She'd been so delighted that she hummed all the way home to her apartment, and even burst into song in the shower.

Now I can face my friends from Wonderworld with pride.

Though what had happened in Wonderworld felt like a vivid dream, Sana had never stopped believing her friends were real, that they were out there somewhere. She would find them, one day.

Toweling her hair dry, Sana switched on her TV. The news was reporting on a fire that had broken out in the woods north of the town that was home to the lazulibird park.

Sana dropped her towel and flung her balcony door open, rushing out to the veranda.

North wind's blowing…

This season, it was all too easy for fires to spiral out of control. The woods were supposed to act as a buffer of sorts, but it had been so dry for so long

that the lush greenery had withered into veritable kindling.

Sana rushed down to the parking lot and flung herself into her car, gunning it to the reserve.

The closer she got to town, the more the opposite lane grew congested with the traffic. Everyone was evacuating.

Her tires squealed as she pulled into the reserve parking lot. She ripped the keys from the ignition and sprinted into the trees.

Thankfully, the blaze hadn't spread to the reserve yet, but Sana could see its orange glow on the northern horizon. It was getting brighter, and closer.

She found the lazulibirds' tree and craned her neck to look up at their nest. The parents huddled over their chicks, their eyes trained on the fire.

Where are the firefighters?

Sana cast around for any sight of firetrucks but didn't see a single one nearby.

She finally found one in the neighborhood just east of the park, spraying water over the streets and buildings.

She ran up to one of the firefighters. “Why isn't anyone protecting the reserve!?”

“We barely have enough people to protect this neighborhood as it is—but what are you even doing here? You should be evacuating with the rest of the civilians!”

“Listen to me—the trees are basically matchsticks right now! If the fire reaches the reserve, the entire city'll go up in smoke!”

“Lady, I told you already, we got our hands full here.”

None of the firefighters would listen to a word she said.

She ran back to the lazulibirds' tree, desperate to save them at least. But their nest was far too high for her to reach.

Smoke stung her nose, and the sound of fire crackling filled her ears. The fire had reached the reserve.

Stupid drought—stupid humans!

A dark light flickered in Sana's eyes.

If they won't listen, then I'll just have to make them.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Sana jumped as a hand fell onto her shoulder.

“What does it *look* like!?”

She spun around and found herself facing a man dressed in the capital city's fire brigade uniform.

“It—it's you. Watcher…”

Her anger shocked out of her, Sana peered more closely at the man's face.

“Sentinel…?”

The two stared at each other, jaws dropped. “It was real… Wonderworld was real.”

Eis Glover, the Sentinel of the City

“Things must be bad if the county's appealed to us for help fighting this blaze, huh?” the brigade captain said to Eis as their firetruck sped through

the streets.

“Yeah. That forest reserve to the north has me worried the most. It'll go up like *that*,” he replied with a snap of his fingers.

“The county brigade's prioritizing the residential areas, which makes sense. But if we let the flames reach the reserve, the whole city's done for. We'll spread out around the park and make sure that doesn't happen.”

“Understood.” Eis the Sentinel of the City nodded.

He glanced to his partner's pale face.

Thoughts of Wonderworld floated through his mind. Eis still wasn't sure if the Balan Theatre had been real or a hallucination or what. But he knew he had not imagined the fire that had led him to the theater in the first place. The fire where he'd retreated from his post without orders, his legs moving as though they'd had a cowardly mind of their own.

His partner hadn't retreated, even when their captain had ordered a withdrawal. His partner had stayed rooted to the spot, put out the blaze, and became the city's hero.

But his partner hadn't been to the station since.

Sentinel had fled before he was supposed to. His partner hadn't fled at all. Yet, between the two of them, it was his partner who faced their captain's wrath.

From the sounds of it, Eis's partner had gotten an earful. “I got no use for wannabe-heroes with a death wish,” the captain had purportedly scolded. “What good are you to the brigade if you go out in a blaze of glory?

Firefighters aren't fireproof, and if you can't get that through your head, then get out.”

But the captain hadn't spared two words for Eis and his too-early retreat.

To make matters even worse, Eis's partner had developed a terrible fear of fire after nearly being engulfed by it, and hadn't been able to come to work.

Until yesterday, when he'd come back after nearly a week's absence.

The captain had only nodded at him without a word.

Eis had wondered if maybe his partner had been to the Balan Theatre, too, but only got a puzzled look in response when he asked.

That had cemented it for him. The Balan Theatre had definitely been some sort of hallucination.

The fire truck stopped.

Eis turned to head for their arranged meeting spot when his captain barked, “Civilian!”

He followed where his captain indicated and saw a woman glaring at the fire.

“I'll get her out of here.” Eis jogged over to her and clapped a hand to her shoulder.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“What does it *look* like!?”

She flung around to face him, and Eis the Sentinel of the City felt shock course through his veins.

“It—it's you. Watcher…”

Watcher's eyes widened, mirroring the astonishment on Eis's own face.

“Sentinel…?”

The two stared at each other, jaws dropped. “It was real… Wonderworld was real.”

That was when Eis noticed the dark light glittering in Watcher's eyes.

“The lazulibirds' nest,” she said. “I have to save it before the fire gets here.”

Eis craned his neck and followed her gaze to the topmost branches of a giant tree, where he could see two birds huddled in their nest, staring at the oncoming flames. There was a brief ruffle of unkempt feathers between them he guessed was one of their chicks.

“The firefighters are refusing to do anything to protect the reserve!”

“I know. The county brigade called us in for backup to help with the neighborhood, but we had a look at the situation and realized we'd better serve the town protecting the reserve. This place is a tinderbox.”

“You're saying we can save them?”

“Maybe. Hey, partner!” Eis called to the man running up behind him. “I'm going to take point! Can you stamp out any sparks that might flare up behind me?”

“You got it.”

Eis would be surrounded if the fire spread behind him as he went.

He's got my back. He'll make sure I have a way out.

“Are you sure you can stop it?” Watcher regarded him with dark eyes.

“I'm no hero, and to be honest, fire scares me silly. But I think I can get it under control, and if *I* think so, then there's nothing to worry about.”

Watched nodded, letting Eis's partner pull her back.

Eis squared his shoulders, keeping his eye on the flames as he slowly made his advance, smothering the fire bit by little bit.

As he passed the giant tree, he looked up at the lazulibirds, still huddled in their nest, still gazing at the flames in front of them.

“Don't worry. I'll put out this fire and that dark light in Watcher's eyes both,” he promised, hoisting the firehose high. “She's here to protect you, so I gotta protect her!”

Yuri Brand, Bugsy

She stared and stared at the chrysalides.

The boys had long ago lost interest in checking on the caterpillar cases once they'd metamorphed to their pupal stage.

But Yuri Brand checked on them every day.

That morning, Yuri's eyes went wide as she stepped into her classroom.

The pupae had all emerged.

That meant they were butterflies now, and they were *beautiful*—each and every one of them. Yuri gazed at them in delight as her classmates filtered into the room.

They noticed something different about Bugsy Yuri's demeanor right away and came to crowd around the case, gasping in shock.

Even her teacher's eyes widened when she came into the room and saw what everyone was looking at.

“Pretty! We should keep them forever and ever,” said one of her classmates, but Yuri shook her head.

“We can't. They'll die if we don't release them right now.”

“But I want to look at them some more!”

“I told you, we have to let them go. Lantern fritillaries are used to living in high altitudes. If they don't get to the mountains right away, they won't be strong enough to survive.”

“But we didn't find them in the mountains. We found them here,” said the boy who had brought the caterpillars to class.

“Remember that super windy day in the spring?” she said. “I think their mom probably got blown down from the mountains. The mugwort they eat hardly grows around here at all, but she must have found some and laid her eggs there. Now do you get why we have to let them go?”

“But…” muttered the boy. None of them seemed convinced.

“Here's an idea,” intervened their teacher. “Yuri, why don't you teach us all about the butterflies for first period, and then we can let them go after that?”

“Wait—if the mugwort doesn't grow around here, how did you always have some to bring in, Yuri?”

“I spent hours and hours looking for it, just like their mom must have spent hours and hours finding a safe place for them to hatch.”

They spent the next hour listening to Yuri talk about the butterflies. Then, during the break, they all filed out into the schoolyard, where Yuri and her classmates opened the lid of the case.

The butterflies seemed confused at first, but then they spread their wings and fluttered out of the case as one.

"*Wow*." Yuri gasped, chasing after the fritillaries as they flew away.

But they were heading in the complete opposite direction of the mountains.

"You're going the wrong way!" she shouted after them. "The mountains are over there!"

At that moment, Yuri felt a soft breeze play over her face. For some reason it made her feel instantly nostalgic.

Why does it remind me of Balan? And…why does it smell like Lance?

Yuri shook her head.

They aren't real. It was just a dream…

But as she watched, the butterflies all turned into the wind and let it carry them toward the mountains.

Yuri breathed a deep sigh of relief.

That's it. Fly home. Home to the mountains!

She ran after the butterflies to make sure they made it all right.

There really was something oddly familiar about that wind.

Jose Gallard, the Scarecrow

Today, like most days, Jose Gallard, the Scarecrow, worked on his farm.

After the storm that had destroyed his crop of corn, Jose had been just about ready to throw in the towel and give up on rebuilding. Then he visited the

Balan Theatre.

Sensible as he was, Jose knew that the Balan Theatre couldn't possibly be real. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced it had been a vivid hallucination he had cooked up to comfort himself at his lowest point. Besides, Jose had more important things to worry about: namely, restoring his farm it its former glory.

Day in and day out, he had worked until he felt like he couldn't work anymore. But it had all been worth it, because he'd harvested a bumper crop for the past two years.

He'd even managed to repay all the money he borrowed from the bank to rebuild and saved enough to send his son to college.

Lately, now that he was finally able to take a bit of time off, Jose found himself reminiscing about Wonderworld. He missed it something awful.

It was just a dream. A hallucination.…

A breeze drifted past him, carrying a fragrance that smelled achingly familiar. A butterfly that had been floating in its wake alighted on Jose's shoulder.

He turned and spotted a young girl who seemed to be chasing after the butterflies.

“I…I know you.”

The girl hesitated. “Scarecrow?”

“Bugsy…”

Words failed them both. They could only stand, staring at one another's shocked face.

Bruce Stone, the Invisible Custodian

He woke to find garbage littering the streets. Again.

But Bruce the Invisible Custodian had been to Wonderworld and back. A little trash couldn't get his spirits down anymore.

He walked through the town picking it up, not caring if he had to tidy things all on his own.

He knew Wonderworld was nothing more than a dream. Something his subconscious had concocted to try and cheer him up. The things that had happened there were too strange and outrageous to possibly be real.

Still, he had woken from that dream with fresh conviction that cleaning up the trash was the right thing for him to do, regardless of what anyone else chose to do about it.

Once, he'd felt so despondent at the sight of children littering—but now it hardly upset him at all. He leaned over and picked up whatever they discarded, smile unwavering.

Another candy wrapper lay at his feet.

He was about to pick it up when a small hand reached out and took it before he could.

Bruce the Invisible Custodian looked up from the ground in surprise.

A boy of about five or six carefully folded the wrapper and tucked it into his pocket.

“Well, hello. You must be new in town. What's your name?”

“We just moved here yesterday,” said the boy. “I saw you picking up and thought I should help.”

“Is that so?” said Bruce, a grin tugging at his lips.

The two of them combed the neighborhood together until they'd picked up every scrap of refuse in sight.

As the sun sank low in the horizon, Bruce turned to the boy. “You better head home before your parents start worrying.”

But the boy shrugged.

“It's okay. No one's home to worry, with my mom in the hospital.”

“Oh,” gasped Bruce. “She isn't sick, is she?”

“Nope,” said the boy with a shake of his head. “She's having my little sister. They'll be home tomorrow, they said.”

Bruce felt the tension in his chest ease. Something told him the little girl would grow up to follow in her big brother's kind footsteps.

“Look at how clean this place is now,” he said, taking in a long, satisfied breath. “It looks just like my stage in Wonderworld.”

“You know about Wonderworld?” The boy gave him a curious look. “My mom's always telling me stories about that place.”

In shock, Bruce peered more closely at the boy. There was familiarity in his little round face.

“You look like Lady of the Midnight Sun.”

“Hey! You know my mom's Wonderworld name!”

Dazed, Bruce stood rooted to the spot. “So, it *was* real…”

Iben Bia, the Lady of the Midnight Sun

Iben Bia, the Lady of the Midnight Sun, held her newborn to her breast, grinning as she watched her son help Bruce the Invisible Custodian pick up trash.

Like Bruce, Iben had always believed that Wonderworld had been an illusion. Something she had hallucinated to dull the agony of losing her loved ones.

It had taken her some time to heal, but eventually she allowed herself to love again. She had even gotten married. But she was so scared something would happen to her husband or her son—or that something would happen to *her* and leave them to suffer in her absence—so she'd shut herself up in her home, barely daring to leave.

But she was getting better at facing those fears with each passing day.

The day her son was born changed her. She wondered what her parents would say if they could see her now, still so mired in grief. She looked at the little boy in her arms that she already loved so fiercely and couldn't bear to think of him hurting, that deeply and for that long, if something happened to her.

That was when she promised herself that, even though she would never stop missing her parents, she wasn't going to let her grief rule her a moment longer.

She was grateful for her time in Wonderworld, even if Balan and all the others had been nothing more than an illusion.

But it was *real*.

When she and her husband had returned home from the hospital with the new addition to their family, they'd found their son out front chatting with the Invisible Custodian.

Her son told her how the two of them had been picking up litter all over town.

Some of the other children had made fun of them as they worked, but eventually one, and then another, and then even more of them had joined in to help.

The best part was that the more the townspeople saw them cleaning up the streets, the fewer and fewer of them littered in the first place.

Lately, even the adults had started helping Bruce pick up litter.

With everyone pitching in, it wasn't long until their town sparkled and shone, not a scrap of garbage in sight.

Bruce didn't have a family of his own, but he soon came to care for Iben's son as his own grandchild. He doted on her daughter, too. “She's bound to be beautiful inside and out,” he'd say, “with you for a mother.”

Her son would be getting out of school any minute now, though he would probably stay out until sundown with his friends, picking up litter around town.

“You know something?” Iben looked down at her daughter, asleep in her crib, and smiled. “You've got the best big brother in the world.”

Cass Caccini, the Clocktower Kid

Upon arriving home from their honeymoon, Cass the Clocktower Kid and Attilio the Pensive Pierrot set down their suitcases in the foyer.

They had visited a town called Eltrando. It hadn't been their plan to use their honeymoon as an excuse to go, though once they'd discovered it on the map, they couldn't not. Unfortunately, though they searched the town high and low, they hadn't been able to find a boy who looked like Streetbeat or a girl called Fighter.

Before they'd been to the theater, neither of them had ever heard of the Eltrando meteor shower, either.

“Maybe they're from the future,” posited Attilio with a frown. “It's possible we won't even be alive by the time they're born.”

“I don't think so,” said Cass, shaking her head. “Haven't you noticed Streetbeat's dance moves and the music player he used are coming into vogue? Or at least, things that are near enough to be more than coincidence. We're getting close to finding them—I can feel it. It's just a matter of time.”

Before Attilio could respond, Cass's phone trilled.

“Oh—it's Cal.” She answered, putting the phone to her ear.

“Turn on the news!” he babbled without preamble. “I have to call the others!”

And with that, he hung up.

Attilio, lounging on the sofa, turned his head to face her. “That was quick.”

“He just said to turn on the news…”

Attilio hit the button on the remote.

On the television, countless shooting stars streaked through the sky—footage sent in from one of the viewers, according to small text in the corner—while a reporter chatted away about the spectacle.

“That's right—*the Eltrandos*, not *Eltrando*!” gasped Cass. “Streetbeat wasn't talking about a place, but about this meteor shower, the one they named after the astronomer that predicted it. And—remember? Streetbeat went into the Balan Theatre the day after it was over!”

“It says it's happening over a place called Highland Isle!”

“I'm sure the others will remember what he said about going into the theater after the Eltrandos, too. We have to go!”

Cass was right. Any of their friends from the Balan Theatre watching this news would know to go straight to Highland Isle. The time difference between here and there was too great to risk calling to make sure; they might be too late if they left any later.

They sprung out the front door, grabbing up their suitcases as they ran.

On their connecting flight, they managed to meet up with Cal the Checkered King, Haoyu the Skygazer, and Fiona the Seagazer. Lucy the Madam of the Mansion found them on the docks as they were getting ready to board the ferry to Highland Isle, flapping her hands in greeting as she ran over to join them.

Yuri Brand, Bugsy

Yuri hopped down from the passenger seat of Jose's truck. He helped get her bag down from the luggage rack, then drove off to look for a space in the dock parking lot.

The wind carried the sharp scent of the sea. Yuri breathed it in and smelled something else mingled with the salt. It made her feel intense pangs of melancholy.

She turned at the sound of footsteps and saw Jose jogging up to join her. His wide eyes were fixed, not on her, but on something in the distance. When she followed his gaze, she gasped: there stood Checkered King, Skygazer, Seagazer, and Madam of the Mansion.

She dropped her bag and rushed over to them, speechless as she flung her arms around each of them in turn, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. It had been so long since she had seen her friends.

“What, no hug for me?” The beautiful stranger who had spoken was crying, too.

“Wait,” Yuri gasped as recognition began to flicker in her mind. “I know you—”

“My name's Cass,” she said, smiling through the tears. “But Attilio—Pensive—every now and then, he still likes to call me Clocktower Kid.”

For a moment, Yuri could only gape at her. Clocktower Kid had been younger than her in the theater, but now she was all grown up.
Yuri flung her arms around her in the tightest hug of them all.

Then, They Waited

“So, the news about the Eltrandos brought us this far,” said Eis the Sentinel of the City as they walked around Highland Isle Central Park. “But now that we're here, how are we going to find Streetbeat and Fighter?”
“Easy.” Sana the Watcher of the Woods pointed down the street, where a troupe of dancers were practicing.
“Keen eyes as ever, my friend.” The two headed over to the troupe.
“Hey, random question—who would you say is the best dancer in town? The best of the boys, that is.”
One of the kids tilted his head in thought. “Leo, hands down. Not that he ever dances with us, though.”
“That's him!” Sentinel's eyes glittered. “Can you point us in his direction?”
“Uh, sure.” The boy lifted an eyebrow at Eis's eagerness. “He lives in the apartments on the edge of town.”
Sana the Watcher withdrew a pad of paper from her pocket. “Don't suppose you could draw us a map?”
The boy sketched out quick instructions and ran off. Eis and Sana peered down at the paper. “Okay,” said Eis. “If we head west, we should—”

He cut off as someone wrapped their arms around him from behind. Startled, he looked behind him and saw a large woman, her face buried in his back as she spoke excitedly in a foreign tongue.

“Uh—sorry, do I…know you?”

She looked up at him, and he recognized her tear-streaked face at once.

“Madam of the Mansion!” Sana shouted in joy.

Behind Madam of the Mansion, others were running toward them: Checkered King, Pensive Pierrot, Scarecrow, Skygazer, Seagazer, Bugsy… and a woman who flung her arms tight around Sana when she reached them.

“Clocktower Kid?” sputtered Sana. “Is that you?”

Wordlessly, Clocktower Kid nodded.

Sana returned the embrace. For a few minutes they caught up on what happened after they'd all left the Balan Theatre.

“Sentinel, Watcher,” said Attilio the Pensive Pierrot, smiling at them. “I'm so glad to see you're doing well. There's a light in your eyes that wasn't there before.”

Sana felt her cheeks flush at his words.

“I almost…relapsed, I suppose you could call it. But Eis helped me out. More importantly…” She showed them the paper with the map on it. “We found out where Streetbeat lives. Should we go say hi?”

Clocktower Kid shook her head. “Not yet. We should make sure we aren't too early. He and Fighter might not have been to the Balan Theatre yet.”

“Ah, good call.”

“Plus, I bet Invisible Custodian and Lady of the Midnight Sun are coming, too. I think we should wait for them, and then we can all go together.”

“But what if those two haven't been to the theater already?” asked Clocktower Kid.

Eis grinned. “Oh, they'll be here. I saw the puzzled looks on their faces when Streetbeat mentioned the Eltrandos when we were leaving. They'll definitely remember.”

Brightness bloomed on Clocktower Kid's face. “Then let's look for them first.”

“There's no need,” said Cal, shaking his head.

Eis looked at the older man in shock. “What are you talking about? They're our friends too—of course there's a need!”

“No, I mean—look,” said Cal pointing down the street. They turned and saw Invisible Custodian and Lady of the Midnight Sun ambling along a nearby outlook.

The breeze picked up, stirring their shared memories like leaves. It carried a fragrance vaguely reminiscent of Lance, or of Balan, or, maybe, of both.

The sun set.

The twelve of them lingered in front of an apartment building.

They watched as a young boy walked out, his hands in his pockets, his gaze lowered to the ground in front of him.

It was Streetbeat.

As he passed, he glanced up at them, but the sullen look on his face remained. He did not recognize any of them at all.

“He must not have been to the theater yet,” Attilio whispered to Cass.

“Fifteen years I've waited to see him again,” she said, wiping away tears for the umpteenth time that day. “He was always this kind of scary big brother figure in my head, but looking at him now—I can't believe what a cute little kid he is.”

“Come on, let's see where he's going.”

They followed Streetbeat. Watched him pause, watched him turn down an alley as if some invisible force drew him onward.

They exchanged glances with one another, then crept down the alley after *the two*.

“Look!”

At the end of the alley, resplendent and glowing, sat the Balan Theatre. Fifteen years had passed since Cass the Clocktower Kid had last seen it. Six, for Jose the Scarecrow.

Streetbeat cast a glance up and down the alley, causing the twelve of them to scurry back and hide in the shadows.

When they dared peek out around the corner, they saw Streetbeat walking into the Balan Theatre.

The twelve of them shared a smile and waited in silence.

They waited as they could see Fighter, who had emerged first, watch Streetbeat enter.

They waited as Streetbeat emerged, a brilliant smile lighting his face.

They waited as he realized the others hadn't come out after him, as he called for his friends in a panic.

Then, they waited no longer.

About the Author

Soshi Kawasaki was born in Ehime Prefecture in 1961 and graduated from Kyoto University's Graduate School of Science with a degree in zoology. He has worked for game companies including Sega Enterprises and Artoon. His debut novel, Long Arms, won the 21st Yokomizo Seishi Mystery Award. He has since published a wide variety of novels, including Old Games (KADOKAWA), a series of mysteries that take place at a game company, and The Depression of Chief Kenichi Tanaka (Kobunsha), a comedic detective novel.

BALAN WONDERWORLD

~Maestro of Mystery, Theatre of Wonders~

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